Democracy in New Zealand

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An up-to-date and concise introduction to New Zealand politics and how it works.

New Zealand is one of the world's oldest democracies for men and women, Māori and Pākehā, with one of the highest political participation rates. But – from MMP to leadership primaries, spin doctors to 'dirty politics' – the country's political system is undergoing rapid change. *Democracy in New Zealand* provides an up-to-date and concise introduction to New Zealand politics and how it works.

Examining the constitution and the political system, cabinet and parliament, political parties, leadership and elections, Raymond Miller draws on data and analysis (including from the 2014 election) to tackle critical questions: Who runs New Zealand? Does political apathy threaten democracy? Will new parties have an ongoing impact? Do we now have a presidential democracy?

Democracy in New Zealand is an ideal university text.

Raymond Miller is Professor of Politics and International Relations at the University of Auckland. He frequently analyses politics in the media and is a past recipient of the Wallace Award for his contribution to the public understanding of electoral matters.

Miller is the author or editor of, among other books, *New Zealand Government and Politics* (Oxford University Press, multiple editions), *Party Politics in New Zealand* (OUP, 2005), *Political Leadership in New Zealand* (Auckland University Press, 2006), and, with Ian Marsh, *Democratic Decline and Democratic Renewal: Political Change in Britain, Australia and New Zealand* (Cambridge, 2012).

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Chapter One

Democratic Society

New Zealand is one of the world's oldest and most enduring democracies. In 1852, the young colony adopted the United Kingdom's Westminster system of government, including an elected lower house and small upper house. In 1867, separate parliamentary seats were created for its indigenous Māori population. Although intended as a temporary measure, separate ethnic representation has been a feature of parliamentary representation ever since. Universal male suffrage was introduced in 1879, and in 1893 New Zealand became the first country to extend the vote to all women.* Beginning in the 1890s, a party system slowly took root. In the heyday of the mass party era, up to one in four voters were party members. Further opportunities for participation occurred at each general election, when approximately nine out of every ten registered voters cast a vote. These unusually high levels of citizen engagement owed much to the size and distribution of the population, which was located largely in small rural and urban communities. Bolstered by a sense of belonging, relations between the government and governed were characterised by feelings of reciprocity and goodwill, leading an American scholar, Leslie Lipson, to observe that 'democracy in the literal sense of government by the people has come as near to fruition as in the Athens of antiquity' (Lipson, 1948: 481).

* Australian women received the right to vote in 1902. The United States followed in 1920 and the United Kingdom in 1928.

Despite presenting the outside world with an image of close democratic involvement, New Zealand follows the practice of much larger countries in having an indirect or representative system of democracy. The reasons are simple and largely concerned with the scale and complexity of the modern nation-state. Representative democracy has been defined as 'a form of government in which, in contradistinction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule' (Held, 2006: 1). Among the characteristics of this form of democracy are universal suffrage, 'one person, one vote', regular elections, the independence of political parties, and the right of all citizens to put themselves forward as the people's representatives. Although rule *by* the people in any literal sense is an unrealistic goal when applied outside the parameters of an election, representative democracy does imply rule *of* and *for* the people, albeit indirectly expressed through the elected parliament.

At the heart of New Zealand's system of representative democracy is a commitment to free, fair and inclusive elections, with eligibility to cast the two votes offered under the mixed-member-proportional (MMP) electoral system – one for a party and the other for the preferred electorate member – more liberally applied than in many other democracies. The country's electoral laws extend the right to vote to all residents, including non-citizens who have been present in the country for at least twelve months. The only other general restrictions are that all eligible voters be registered on the electoral roll and have lived in the same electoral district for a minimum of one month. Following on from decisions taken by the United Kingdom and United States, in the late 1960s and early 1970s the minimum voting age was progressively reduced from 21 to twenty years, followed by the current age of eighteen.* A Bill before Parliament in 2007 proposed that the voting age be further reduced to sixteen years, on the grounds that this would bring it into line with the school leaving age and a number of other individual rights, including the right to marry and have children. The Bill's sponsor later allowed it to lapse, believing that it lacked sufficient parliamentary and public support to become law. Those

* A number of countries, including Brazil and Malta, have reduced the voting age to sixteen years. Scotland lowered the voting age to sixteen for its independence referendum in 2014.

citizens and residents who have moved overseas remain eligible to vote providing they have returned to the country during the preceding three years and one year respectively. From time to time, other restrictions may apply. When considering the future of separate Māori seats, for example, the Royal Commission on the Electoral System recommended that any decision to abolish or retain the seats be restricted to those on the Māori electoral roll. The National Party disagreed, believing it to be a matter on which all New Zealanders should have a say. In contrast to the residency provision for voters, parliamentary candidates must be citizens.*

While the particular form of democracy practised in New Zealand is largely derived from elsewhere, especially Westminster's 'mother' Parliament, it is also a product of the country's particular physical and social environments, three aspects of which will be discussed in this chapter: geographical remoteness, small population base and brief history as a fully independent state. The paradoxes contained within each add layers of interest and complexity to what is a distinctively New Zealand system of democracy.

Remoteness

> 'All people think that New Zealand is close to Australia or Asia, or somewhere, and that you cross to it on a bridge. But that is not so. It is not close to anything, but lies by itself, out in the water. It is nearest to Australia, but still not near.' – MARK TWAIN

A recurring theme in the debate over national identity and what it is to be a New Zealander is the impact of geographical remoteness on New Zealand's sense of place and view of the outside world. Every generation has been challenged by its effects, which may include a sense of distance, leading to feelings of isolation and disengagement. In the early 1960s, a

* In 2002 a newly elected United Future MP, Kelly Chal, was forced to give up her parliamentary seat when it was found that, despite having been a New Zealand resident for some eight years, she had not taken out citizenship.

small group of scholars examined the impact of remoteness on the New Zealand way of life (Sinclair, 1961). Writing with the consequences of the Second World War still vivid in their memories, they acknowledged the dislocation felt by young soldiers as they returned from Europe. But they also noted some positive effects, including a heightened sense of national consciousness, together with an ability to understand and engage with the outside world (Chapman, 1961: 43). In the view of one contributor, 'New Zealanders, despite their physical remoteness from New York, London and Paris, are part of the world-wide dialogue of European civilization' (ibid.: 44).

From today's perspective, it seems almost fanciful to have been referring to a 'world-wide dialogue' in the early 1960s, decades before the advent of an integrated global economy, political union in Europe, the easy availability of international air travel and the inter-connected world of the internet. But in fact, post-colonial New Zealand was remarkably well connected with the outside world. As well as enjoying the benefits of a steady inflow of migrants annually from a diverse range of cultures and societies,* successive generations of young New Zealanders embarked on 'The Big OE', with the most popular destination being the cosmopolitan city of London. Yet further opportunities to travel and experience other cultures were made possible by the government's devotion to Empire, and later its commitment to the American-led alliance system, the consequences of which have been lengthy periods of overseas military combat for some New Zealanders in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and South East Asia.

In recent times, there has been growing appreciation that New Zealand's remote location gives it and its populace a number of distinct benefits, including political autonomy, secure borders, low threat of terrorist attack, and the possibility, in theory if not in practice, of achieving a cleaner domestic and regional environment. Together, these benefits provide opportunities for self-determination barely imaginable in the crowded and disputed territories of the Northern Hemisphere. On the other hand,

* In 2014, one in four New Zealanders were immigrants.

unlike more strategically located states, New Zealand has at times struggled to maintain an international profile and identity, especially in comparison with its closest neighbour, Australia. During its early development, it was regarded as little more than a distant and inconsequential outpost of the British Empire. More recently, it realigned its identity to fit with its location as a nation of the South Pacific, a decision that was reinforced by its opposition to French nuclear testing and the occasional visit of nuclear-armed and/or -powered American ships. In the view of critics of New Zealand's foreign policy stance under the current National-led government, independence is no longer guaranteed, and indeed is being compromised by the country's renewed involvement in Western military activities and surveillance networks, especially its 'Five Eyes' surveillance partnership with Britain and the United States.

Beginning in the colonial period, New Zealand's predominantly pastoral economy was well placed to compete in distant markets. Perishable food could be sent to the other side of the world by refrigerated shipping from as early as the 1880s. In an arrangement that proved highly beneficial for New Zealand producers, the United Kingdom took up to 90 per cent of the country's agricultural exports. In return, it sent disproportionately low levels of imported goods to New Zealand. This favourable arrangement lasted until 1971, when the United Kingdom government announced its decision to join the European Union (then referred to as the European Economic Community or Common Market). While European farmers were prepared to accept, if grudgingly, British access to the European Economic Community (EEC), they were adamant that any long-term arrangement would not include the Commonwealth. As well as being excluded from Europe, New Zealand's trade prospects with the Asia-Pacific region appeared similarly bleak, especially since its large national populations consumed comparatively little of what New Zealand produced.

To help compensate for these losses, in 1983 New Zealand forged a free trade agreement with Australia (see Table 1.1). Within a matter of years, Australian investment in New Zealand's commercial and retail sectors had intensified to a point where all of the major banks and many of the large retail chains were owned by Australian companies. Between the 1980s and the early 2000s, the United States and Japan also emerged as significant

partners, followed by South Korea and Singapore. The signing of a free trade agreement with China proved to be a landmark event in relations between the two countries. Within five years, China had replaced Australia as New Zealand's largest two-way trading partner. Export commodities included dairy, especially milk powder, timber and wool. In return, New Zealand imported machinery, electrical goods, clothing and apparel, and furniture.

New Zealand exporters continue to be susceptible to a number of risks, including rising oil prices and other transportation costs, international unrest, fluctuating exchange rates, and the sensitivity of markets to food quality and safety, as illustrated by China's temporary ban on infant formula in 2014, a decision that threatened the future of some 3 per cent of all exports to that country. As well as having to produce food of the highest quality, New Zealand exporters must be highly efficient, selling in distant markets at prices that compete with those of local producers. In the absence of significant forms of government assistance, such as subsidies and tariffs, New Zealand's open economy is particularly vulnerable to competition from other, more protected markets.

Table 1.1: Free Trade Agreements with New Zealand

Australia	1983
Singapore	2001
Thailand	2005
Chile	2005
Brunei	2005
China	2008
Malaysia	2009
Hong Kong	2011
ASEAN	2011
Taiwan	2013
South Korea	2014

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2015.

While periodic interruptions to bilateral trade may prove costly, they hardly compare with the challenge posed by the growing phenomenon of economic globalisation. Some observers claim that we now live in a

'borderless world' in which the nation-state has lost both any meaningful identity and its capacity for autonomous action. Isolated and heavily dependent economies, such as New Zealand's, are deemed to be especially vulnerable to the world's great powers, notably the United States and China, as well as major trading blocs and multi-national investors. Economic nationalists, whether they come from the social democratic left or the populist right, express concern whenever attempts are made to privatise state-owned assets or sign up to free trade agreements in situations that might prove disadvantageous to New Zealand, a recent example of which is the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement between twelve countries, including the United States and Japan.

Whilst acknowledging that economic globalisation poses a threat to the continuing existence of the nation-state, Anthony Giddens adopts the view that globalisation can have the reverse effect of empowering the nation-state by providing fresh opportunities for the development of greater national self-awareness and assertiveness (Giddens, 1998: 28–33). According to this argument, rather than the nation-state gradually disappearing, what we are witnessing is a flourishing of sub-national identities and independence movements, such as those found in Quebec, Scotland, Catalonia and elsewhere. And despite its earlier colonial identity, modern New Zealand, it can be argued, has developed a clearer sense of its own national identity, while at the same time seeking to extend its influence through a growing network of bilateral free trade agreements and multilateral forums and associations. These include the Commonwealth, the United Nations (UN), the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC). As a small but independent voice internationally, New Zealand has gained a reputation for 'punching above its weight', as illustrated by the appointment of a former prime minister, Mike Moore, as Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (1999–2002), Don McKinnon as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth (2000–8), and Helen Clark as Administrator of the UN Development Programme (2009–). Perhaps most notable of all, New Zealand has twice been elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (1994–1995; 2015–2016).

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