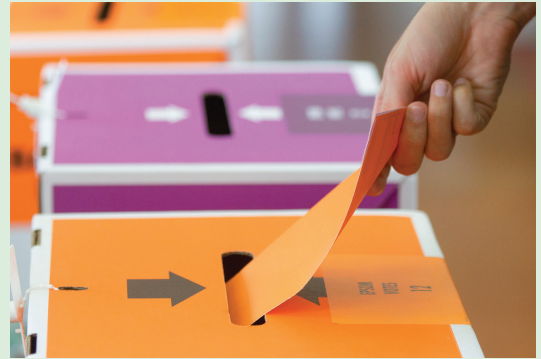




## ELECTORAL REFORM IN NEW ZEALAND: POLITICS RENEWED?

**Events:** In a non-binding referendum in New Zealand in 1992, 85 per cent of electors voted to change the established single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system, (popularly known as ‘first past the post’) with 71 per cent of voters backing the mixed-member proportional (MMP) system as their preferred alternative. In a binding second referendum the following year, MMP gained the support of 54 per cent in a straight contest against SMP. The first election using MMP was held in 1996, and it has been used in each of the subsequent elections. The issue of electoral reform had gained growing prominence in New Zealand after two successive elections (in 1978 and 1981) had been won by the ‘wrong’ party (the National Party won parliamentary majorities even though the Labour Party gained more votes). Other factors included growing discontent with the electoral system amongst Labour supporters, due to the National Party being in power for all but six years during 1949–84, and the belief that proportional representation would boost Maori representation.

**Significance:** Has electoral reform in New Zealand been a success? As ever with electoral reform, the debate turns on how ‘success’ is defined. Supporters of electoral reform have argued that MMP in New Zealand has brought about greater responsiveness and accountability. The clearest evidence of this has been a significant widening of the representation of parties, both in the House of Representatives and in government. The Labour-National two-party system has undoubtedly been broken, giving way to a multiparty system. The average number of parties represented in the House under MMP has increased from 2.4 during the period 1946–93 to 7 since 1993. Most tellingly, since reform, neither National nor Labour has been able to govern alone on the basis of a parliamentary majority. The succession of coalition governments that has resulted from reform has shifted the focus of New Zealand politics away from simple rivalry between National and Labour towards a more complex process of consensus-building, as both major parties look to forge alliances with smaller parties. After the 2011 election, for instance, National formed a coalition government through an agreement with ACT New Zealand, United Future and the Maori Party. Although the same group of coalition partners remained in office after the 2014 general election, after the 2017 general election a minority coalition government was formed



between Labour, New Zealand First and the Green Party. This was the first New Zealand government formed since the switch to MMP that did not include the the most popular party in terms of votes and parliamentary seats in the election (National).

However, criticisms of MMP continue to be voiced in New Zealand, not least by the National Party, which remains committed to a return to SMP. Critics claim that the two-vote system causes voter confusion and leads to the ‘contamination effect’, whereby views about constituency candidates affect the distribution of party-list votes. It is also far from clear that the introduction of MMP has had a beneficial impact on voter turnout, the second election under MMP, in 1999, recording the lowest turnout of any twentieth-century New Zealand election. Two, deeper concerns about MMP continue to be voiced, however. First, MMP has been portrayed as the enemy of strong government, in that, being divided, coalition governments are often unable to deliver decisive leadership. Second, misgivings have been expressed about the power of so-called ‘pivotal parties’, small parties whose policy influence greatly exceeds their electoral strength because they are able to do deals with both major parties. Concerns such as these encouraged National to call a further electoral reform referendum which coincided with the 2011 general election and offered voters a straight choice between MMP and a return to SMP. However, the resulting 58 per cent in favour of keeping MMP (a 4 per cent increase on the vote in 1993) indicated broad satisfaction with the new system and suggests that it is unlikely to be abandoned in the near future. In 2012, an Electoral Commission report proposed a number of reforms to the MMP system, but, lacking sufficient popular support, none of them were enacted.