The Realities of Electoral Reform: Voter Behaviour Before and After Electoral Reform in New Zealand

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Electoral rules structure democratic participation, determining who participates and how that participation is translated into parliamentary representation. Electoral rules create incentives for participation and proscribe certain behaviour on the part of parties, candidates, and voters. Cross-national comparisons of democracies reveal systematic differences in participation patterns across countries employing different electoral systems. These observations have influenced the recent modishness of electoral reform, or, more accurately, electoral engineering – the practice of altering certain rules to encourage preferred behavioural outcomes.

Electoral engineering is particularly important in emerging democracies, where leaders attempt to best accommodate the cleavages that define and divide their societies. But this practice has influenced the agendas of established democracies as well. Pippa Norris (2004) points out that major electoral system change has been introduced in five of Arend Lijphart's 'established post-war democracies' during the 1990s, including Britain, Israel, Italy, Japan, and New Zealand. In Canada, five provinces have formally discussed the possibility of reforming the single member plurality (SMP) system in favour of a more proportional alternative. In each case, reform has been seen as a means of addressing and 'improving' the quality of democracy.

Despite such enthusiasm, the long-term effects of electoral reform are not yet fully understood. While proponents point to systematic differences between states using different electoral systems, they often acknowledge the possibility of 'unintended consequences' of actual reforms (Norris 2004; Courtney 2004a, 2004b, Katz 2004). Additionally, any resulting behavioural change is "glacial" and may only be observed once generational change has replaced mature, experienced voters with new ones (Norris 2004). In the aftermath of the reform boom of the mid-1990s, numerous articles addressed electoral reforms in New Zealand, Italy, and Japan (Banducci, Donavan, and Karp 1999; Gallagher 1998; Hazan and Rahan 2000; Karp and Banducci 1999; Karp, Vowles, Banducci, and Donovan 2002; Katz 1996; McKean and Scheiner 2000), however, these early evaluations may have occurred too soon after reform to provide a complete account of the participatory effects of any changes.

While Lijphart (1994) includes cases of electoral reform in his analyses of post-war democracy, his focus is on its aggregate mechanical effects, such as the consequences for proportionality, the effective number of elective and parliamentary parties, and the propensity for majority versus coalition government. Less well understood is the effect of reform on individual-level behaviour.

Four general elections have taken place since the introduction of a Mixed Member Proportional system (MMP) in New Zealand in 1996. Previously considered the classic model of a Westminster Parliamentary democracy (Lijphart 1994; Taagepera and Shugart 1989), a 1993 referendum modified New Zealand's ballot structure, district magnitude, and electoral formula to craft a more proportional system. Among other findings, comparisons between PR and SMP systems suggest that the former encourages higher levels of voter turnout (Jackman 1987; Blais and Carty 1990; Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Blais, Massicotte, and Dobryznska 2003; Karp, Banducci, and Bowler 2007). Nonetheless, turnout since 1999 appears to have continued its pre-reform fall, despite arguments that MMP has prevented rates from dropping any more quickly (Vowles and Aimer 2004; Vowles, Banducci, and Karp 2006).

This paper investigates the effects of electoral reform on citizen behaviour in New Zealand, focusing specifically upon changes in voter turnout pre- and post-reform. Before proceeding to the analysis, the paper briefly reviews the literature regarding the effects of electoral rules and electoral reform on voter turnout and then elaborates upon the context of New Zealand's electoral

competition between 1990 and 2005, including the reasons for reform. Following this review, the methodology and operationalization of the investigation shall be outlined. Finally, there will be an analysis of the findings and a tidy conclusion.

Electoral Systems and Turnout

Electoral rules are laws that govern how elections are administered. Generally, these laws determine who can vote, how votes are cast, and how votes will be used to determine the composition of the legislature. This paper deals with a more focused concept of electoral systems than this. Following Rae (1971), electoral systems are defined as laws that dictate how votes are translated into legislative seats.

Electoral systems may be classified according three main features: ballot structure, electoral districting and electoral formula (Rae 1971; Taagepera and Shugart 1989). *Ballot structure* refers to the degree of voter choice offered by the system, as determined by whether the voter must choose a single candidate/party or may indicate a preferential ranking. The *electoral district* is defined as the number of seats to be filled in any constituency. *Electoral formula* refers to how votes are translated to parliamentary seats. These features shape election outcomes, creating incentives for voters, political parties and candidates.

Ballot structures influence the number of political parties in a system; multipartyism is encouraged when voters are allowed to rank their preferences (Cox 1997). Electoral districting is one of the strongest predictors of electoral proportionality; although no system guarantees perfectly proportional results, those systems with larger effective district magnitudes often produce more proportional seat-to-vote ratios (Rae 1971; Taagepera and Shugart 1989). Electoral formulae have a similar effect; when compared to plurality or majority systems, PR systems tend to produce more proportional results (Rae 1971; Taagepera and Shugart 1989; Jackman 1987; Lijphart 1994).

Variation in election results across different electoral systems illustrates the mechanical effect of such rules (Duverger 1954). The term *mechanical effect* refers to the effect of the electoral system upon the composition of a legislature; the effect is a question of arithmetic, determining what happens *after* a vote is cast. Another consequence of electoral systems observed by Maurice Duverger (1954) is their *psychological effect* – how political actors react to the incentives created by the rules and their associated mechanical effects. The psychological effect influences how people vote and how parties compete, while the mechanical effect determines how those votes are translated into legislative seats.

Voter turnout is one factor influenced by the psychological effect (Blais and Carty 1991; Norris 2004). It has been repeatedly observed that voter turnout tends to be higher in countries with PR systems than in those with plurality systems (Jackman 1987; Blais and Carty 1990; Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Blais, Massicotte, and Dobryznska 2003; Karp, Banducci, and Bowler 2007). Because citizens are more likely to vote when they believe it 'makes a difference' (Franklin 2002), they are more likely to participate in systems that encourages this belief; PR is hypothesized to be one such system (Jackman 1987; Blais and Carty 1990; Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Karp, Banducci, and Bowler 2007).

Jackman (1987) examines the effects of electoral competitiveness, vote-to-seat disproportionality, multipartyism, unicameralism, and compulsory voting on the degree to which

voters feel that "their vote will make a difference to both the election outcome itself and to the subsequent formation of a government" (407) and, by extension, turnout. Of these five, competitiveness, disproportionality, and multipartyism relate directly to the electoral system in place. Jackman argues that PR systems are generally more competitive, more proportional, and more predisposed toward multipartyism than plurality systems. The first two, he argues, tend to produce higher voter turnout. Multipartyism, however, typically reduces turnout, given that voters have less direct control over the formation of government. Overall, he argues that PR systems exhibit higher turnout levels than other systems, despite the dampening effects of multipartyism.

Blais and Carty (1990), however, argue that Jackman's research investigates the influence of the mechanical effects of electoral systems, rather than the influence of the electoral rules themselves. Jackman, they argue, measures the effects of multi-partyism and proportionality on turnout, not the effects of a PR system. In their analysis of 509 elections in 20 countries, Blais and Carty observe that the *presence* of PR in a country is enough to encourage higher voter turnout, whether or not the system actually fosters proportional results. They conclude that electoral systems have 'symbolic effects,' and that the "mere fact that voters have an electoral procedure that assures some proportionality" promotes participation (Ibid, 179).

A later study performed by Blais and Dobrzynska (1999) produced similar results. Expanding previous analysis to include 91 democracies, PR systems were again found to consistently result in higher turnout than majoritarian or plurality systems, regardless of overall proportionality. They note, however, that proportionality is not entirely irrelevant – voter turnout is lower where a PR system produces distortional results than where it leads to proportionality. The implication is that voter efficacy plays a role in turnout in such systems.

Although it is typically assumed that political efficacy is higher in PR systems because they waste fewer votes, Karp and Banducci (2007) have found that it is strongly correlated with the strength of a citizen's preference for one of the parties – that is, party identification. Consulting a twenty-seven country sample of Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) results, they observe that turnout is strongly correlated with both strength of party identification and the belief that the respondent's vote makes a difference. Political efficacy also varies with strength of the party with which a voter identifies; the stronger the electoral strength of a party, the stronger the feelings of political efficacy.

Controlling for different electoral systems, Karp and Banducci found much smaller gaps in feelings of efficacy between weak and stronger party identifiers in PR systems than in any other, echoing Anderson and Guillory's (1997) finding that the satisfaction gap between voters is much smaller in PR systems. Confirming the effect of electoral systems on efficacy and turnout, Karp, Banducci and Bowler (2007) also show that the level of competition and party efforts to mobilize votes contributes little to explaining turnout differences between PR and plurality systems.

Due to such findings, the adoption of PR has been advocated as a catalyst for democratic renewal, and, in particular, for increasing turnout. There are important reasons, however, for questioning the effectiveness of electoral reform on voter turnout. The political culture of a mature democracy develops slowly, and any psychological effects of a new electoral system may may result in 'unintended consequences' or may not necessarily take hold (Norris 2004; Katz 2004).

These short-comings and unintended consequences have been found in numerous studies of electoral reform (Cox, Rosenbluth, and Theis 1999; Gallagher 1998; Hazan and Rahan 2000; Jansen 2004; Katz 1996; McKean and Scheiner 2000). Much of this research examines the mechanical effects of electoral reform or focuses on its psychological effects after only a single election or two – while the new system retains its novelty. These studies typically acknowledge this, and they nearly all close with reminders that in such elections people may not have had sufficient time to settle into habits that will come to shape turnout levels. And in many of these early analyses, psychological effects have not played out as intended by the reform initiative or as predicted by the literature.

One possible reason for the resilience of certain political cultures may be generational – that is, older citizens are oftentimes resistant to behavioural change. Explaining the relationship between rational choice and participation, Mark Franklin (1999) emphasizes the role of habit. After only three elections, he argues, citizens have made up their mind about whether or not they are voters, a perception that shapes participation for the rest of their lives. Habit formation is important in the context of whether electoral reforms will successfully influence psychological effects. If a citizen has already developed the habit of voting, reforms may not affect his or her participation.

While this suggests that behavioural adjustments may not occur automatically, the composition of an electorate is in constant flux – new voters enter and existing voters leave the system regularly. Much as Butler and Stokes (1975) observed that political change occurred as younger generations gradually replace older ones, voter habits may similarly evolve. Norris (2004) argued that a similar process would lead to the 'glacial' pace of any behavioural change. Older generations have been socialized to behave in a certain way due to electoral rules – at the time of reform, the entire electorate will have been socialized under a particular system. She notes that voter turnout did not grow until a generation after the introduction of female suffrage; women socialized before female suffrage did not vote whereas women who grew up under the new system did so upon reaching adulthood.

In line with Franklin (1999), Rein Taagepera (1997) has estimated that the long-term effects of any rule change will not be evident until the third election held under the new system. If it takes three elections to observe change in the electorate, analyses conducted in the aftermath of reforms may have been premature. According to such standards, sufficient time has now passed to observe the full effects of the shift to MMP in New Zealand in 1993 on voter behaviour.

An Overview of New Zealand Elections, 1990 - 2005[1]

Before proceeding to our analysis, a brief overview of the lead up to reform and the contexts of the elections that we examine is in order. New Zealand's *Royal Commission on Electoral Reform* was convened by the Labour Government in 1985 in response to the wildly disproportional results of the elections in 1978 and 1981. Given very broad terms of reference, the Royal Commission's 1986 report emerged with an equally broad series of recommendations. Among other things, it recommended a new mechanism for citizen-initiated referenda, campaign spending limits, an additional 31 seats in the legislature, and a new formula for allocating seats to the country's Maori population. The most significant recommendation was that the country's SMP system be replaced with MMP – a system deemed by the commission to be "fair and legitimate in ways that our present single member plurality system can never be" (Boston et al 1996, 20).

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[1] This summary is based upon (Vowles et al 1993, 1995, 1998, 2002, 2004) and (Geddis 2005).

The Royal Commission advised the government seek public approval and install MMP before the 1987 election. The Labour Government included such a referendum in their 1987 platform, but it was never held. In 1990, National promised that *they* would hold a binding referendum during their next term.

Before this binding referendum, the National government held an "indicative" referendum in 1992 in order to determine whether the New Zealand public was still interested in electoral reform. This indicative referendum consisted of two distinct questions. First, should New Zealand retain or change its current electoral system. Second, if the SMP system must be replaced, should it be replaced with MMP, the Single Transferable Vote (STV), the Alternative Vote (AV), or a Supplementary Member system. Against the "backdrop of harsh welfare benefit cuts and [an] economic recession" (Boston et al 1996, 22), 85 percent of voters indicated that they were ready for a new electoral system, a further 70.5 percent choosing MMP as their preferred alternative, a reflection of citizens' growing disaffection with their politics and government.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the country's political culture had emphasized compromise and consensus as both Labour and National governments worked to build a welfare state; in the late-1970s, however, these same governments had begun dismantling the country's social services, sometimes contrary to campaign promises and often to the disappointment of their constituents. Continuing frustration with this trend into the 1990s, in addition to disproportionality of results lead to the outcome of the binding referendum that was scheduled to coincide with the 1993 General Election. Asked simply to choose between MMP and SMP, 53.9 percent of voters supported system reform.

Election results in 1993 have been argued to be a reflection of early public support for this new system. Numerous new third-parties successfully contested four seats, leading observers to refer to the 1993 campaign as "an early MMP election" (Vowles et al 1995, 1). The centrist New Zealand First party and the left-wing Alliance coalition of the NewLabour, Democrat, Green, and Mana Motuhake parties each won two seats, combining for the best third-party electoral performance in over ninety years.

The 1996 General Election was the first to be held under MMP. As was expected, no single party won enough seats to form a majority government and a coalition government was necessary. After nearly two months of negotiations, the right-wing National Party emerged to announce that it had forged a coalition with the centrist New Zealand First, a move that alienated supporters of both. Despite the new, more consensual electoral system, New Zealanders remained unable to control their governments.

Voter attitudes grew more optimistic after the 1999 election, as the popular Labour-Alliance coalition under Prime Minister Helen Clark only grew more popular in the two years following the general election. However, this coalition collapsed in 2002, over disagreements about the direction of foreign policy in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. Forced to make a premature trip to the polls, voters felt even less satisfied with MMPs proclivity toward coalition government.

As in 1999, the 2002 and 2005 general elections both returned Labour-Alliance minority governments under the leadership of Helen Clark. These minority coalitions were forced to rely

on the confidence of opposition parties whose support was not guaranteed, putting pressure upon the government to seek support from sympathetic third parties when necessary. Rather than establishing official majority coalitions that would not only alienate voters but could also lock parties into unpopular policies, the government pursued partnerships that would cultivate support for particular initiatives as needed. If indeed voters are more supportive of this style of minority government, it may very well become the model for New Zealand policy making under MMP.

Hypotheses

Theory suggests that the psychological effects of electoral reform in New Zealand ought to have led to an increase in voter turnout. Despite these predictions, turnout has actually declined since the introduction of MMP in 1996. Our hypotheses get to the root of why this happens to be the case.

H1 – *Changes in aggregate levels of voter efficacy from one election to another will be matched by similar changes in aggregate voter turnout.*

The first hypothesis involves the positive association between feelings of voter efficacy and voter turnout. Increases in aggregate levels of voter efficacy ought to lead to increases in voter turnout, and vice versa.

H2 – *Aggregate levels of voter turnout and voter efficacy will peak in 1996.*

The second hypothesis also relates to the positive relationship between feelings of vote efficacy and voter turnout. Theory of electoral systems supports a prediction of consistently higher turnout and voter efficacy after the switch from SMP to MMP. However, it has been well-established that the first MMP election, held in 1996, was the one in which turnout peaked, falling consistently thereafter until 2005, when it increased slightly. The 1996 election should serve as a high point, however, because it was held under a new system that had come with a guarantee of more proportional outcomes, which should have encouraged greater voter turnout (Blais and Carty 1990). With the unpopular and dysfunctional government coalitions following the 1996 and 1999 elections, it is quite possible that feelings of voter efficacy would fall again after 1996, much like turnout did.

H3 – *Voter efficacy ought to be a stronger predictor of voter turnout before 1996 than after electoral reform.*

The third hypothesis involves the relationship between individual levels of voter efficacy and turnout. Levels of voter efficacy are typically lower in plurality and majority systems because supporters of small or unsuccessful parties feel much less efficacious than supporters of the major parties; in proportional systems, on the other hand, this efficacy gap is much smaller given the increased possibility for smaller parties to earn seats. Thus vote efficacy can be expected to provide less explanatory power under MMP than the previous electoral system.

H4 – *Identification with a third party will matter less for individual level turnout after electoral reform.*

The literature suggests that identification with third parties is a disincentive to turnout in plurality

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and majority systems given that these electoral systems often fail to reward minor parties with seats proportionate to their vote shares. After the switch to MMP, smaller parties are more likely to be rewarded with seats and, as such, voters who identify with these parties will have a greater incentive to turnout. As such, identification with a third party after the switch to MMP is likely to matter less for individual level turnout given that they will be likely to believe that their votes are 'wasted'.

H5 – *Identification with a coalition party will have no effect on individual level turnout after electoral reform.*

Voters identifying with coalitions parties will be faced by opposing pressures after MMP is introduced in New Zealand. The first pressure, indicated by the literature, are increased feelings of efficacy that should result from having one's preferred party in the governing coalition – one's vote has influenced government formation. This pressure will encourage voter turnout. The second pressure is related to the context of New Zealand's reforms. These unpopular post-reform coalitions left certain supporters unhappy that their vote went to create the coalition, which may reasonably depress voter turnout. The balance of these pressures should eliminate the effect of identification with a coalition party on turnout.

H6 – *Turnout among young New Zealanders should increase as more new voters are introduced to the system.*

The sixth hypothesis involves the generational effects on electoral reform. Recall that once a citizen has participated in three or more elections, electoral behaviour is more likely to reflect electoral habit. Thus, after electoral reform occurs, mature voters may not respond to the new incentives presented by the new system. Newer voters, however, will be developing their political habits under these new electoral rules, and their behaviour should respond accordingly. So, despite the overall drop in voter participation between 1996 and 2002, the relative decline among newer voters should be more muted. Given the greater incentives to vote under MMP, voter turnout may well even improve among newer voters.

H7 – *Turnout among newer voters will fall more dramatically than among any other group.*

However, turnout is also likely to be affected by political conditions; voter turnout in New Zealand appears to have dropped in response to the unpopular coalition building that occurred among the greater number of parties winning seats in the legislature. Since the habits of new voters are more likely to be affected by such conditions, it is quite possible that they will respond by not participating in elections, possibly instilling a habit of non-voting. Voters who have already formed a turnout 'habit', on the other hand, will be less responsive to political conditions.

Data and Method

In order to test our hypothesis, we investigate voter behaviour in the six New Zealand General Elections held between 1990 and 2005. We employ the New Zealand Election Studies (NZES) for each election. The NZES data is appropriate for this study not only because it captures the key determinants of voter turnout, but also because it provides us with a generally consistent set of questions on either side of the electoral reform.

Although the delivery of later surveys became more experimental, the core of these studies has been a mail-back questionnaire completed by respondents on their own after the election. The respondents have been chosen randomly from the electoral rolls, save for certain survey-to-survey panellists and Maori respondents, and they are given three opportunities to fill in their mail-back surveys, starting on election day, before they are given the survey by telephone. Our analysis treats panellists as discrete respondents from election to election – our analysis stretches from 1990 to 2005, while the different waves of panellists are typically included for only two to three elections at most.

The later instances of the NZES also have rolling cross-sectional campaign period surveys performed over telephone. These surveys lasted only for three to five minutes, and did not ask all of the questions needed for our analysis; however, those contacted during the campaign period were also sent mail-back form that would complete their survey participation. These post-campaign responses were included with our sample where possible.

The 1990 New Zealand Election Survey questionnaire was first distributed to potential respondents on Election Day, October 27, 1990. At the end of data collection period in January 1991, the sample size was 2,100. The sample for the 1993 NZES includes 2,251 respondents surveyed between November 6, 1993 and March 1994. The 1996 NZES sample includes 5,103 post-election respondents and in 1999, the sample was up to 5,890. The number of respondents dropped to 5,315 in 2002, and further to 3,743 in 2005, largely a result of non-completed surveys.

All of the data needed to perform our analysis is from these surveys, and linear regression analysis is employed to examine changes in the determinants of our dependent variable, turnout, for each of the five elections held between 1990 and 2005. The results for these regressions are compared to determine the effects, if any, of the electoral reform on turnout.[2] The independent variables include respondent year of birth, grouped into cohorts, feelings of vote efficacy, party identification, strength of party identification, and level of education. Although not included in the regressions, the election year may also be considered an independent variable, with the electoral system the intervening variable.

A set of cohorts was created to assess whether a voter's susceptibility to the psychological effects of electoral reform is dependent on the whether or not they have formed a 'habit' of voting. Voters having experienced relatively few elections prior to electoral reform can be argued to be more likely to respond to the effects of the reform. The four cohorts are respondents born before 1945, respondents born between 1945 and 1959, respondents born between 1960 and 1969, and respondents born after 1970. The years chosen to delineate these cohorts will provide the analysis with a reasonable division between those most experienced and those the least experienced. By including everyone born after 1970 in one cohort, it will be possible to monitor those least experienced throughout all six elections.

Feelings of voter efficacy refer to the respondents' own feelings regarding the impact of their vote. The more a respondent feels that their vote makes a difference to the electoral outcome, the more efficacious they feel. Two questions from each survey are employed to measure vote

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[2] Because the dependent variable, vote turnout, is dichotomous, logistic regression is the more appropriate statistical technique. Given that we are less concerned with properly modeling the determinants of turnout than we are with simply comparing effects across elections, linear regression is employed for ease of interpretation.

efficacy. The resulting "voter efficacy" index ranges in value from 0 to 10. The first question used to construct this index is "Do you agree with the following statement: My vote really counts in elections." The second question employed changes depending on which election is being analyzed. In 1990 to 1996, respondents were asked whether they believed that "my vote is wasted if I cast it for a party which is bound to lose." In 1999, 2002, and 2005, the question used to determine the respondent's efficacy is whether they agree that "people like me don't have any say in what the government does."[3]

Party identification is measured by recording which party the respondent feels closest to. What matters, however, is not the particular party to which the respondent feels closest. Rather, what is more relevant is the level of success of the party – whether or not the party was in the previous coalition government, and whether the party is a major party or a third party will contribute to feelings of voter efficacy, which in turn influences voter turnout.

Thus, there are two dummy variables used to account for the respondents' party identification. The first dummy variable records whether the respondent identifies with third party. In New Zealand, National and Labour are considered to be the country's major parties, whereas all other parties are considered to be third parties. Respondents were given a score of 1 if they identified with any party other than National or Labour and a 0 otherwise. Similarly, respondents were given a score of 1 on a second dummy variable if they identified with a party that was included in the government after the previous election and a 0 otherwise.

Another variable measures the strength of respondents' party identification. On each of the NZES surveys, respondents who gave a party identification were also queried about the strength of this identification – asked to consider whether their party identification was *very strong, fairly strong,* or *not very strong.* Those replying that their attachment was *very strong* were given a score of 3, *fairly strong* a 2, and *not very strong* a 1, while respondents claiming no party identification were given a score of 0.

The final independent variable to be coded was level of education, as measured by the highest level of education earned by the respondent. Scores here ranged between 0 and 6 from 1990 to 1999 and between 1 and 7 in 2002 and 2005. Although theories of electoral reform have said little about the effects of education on turnout, we include it here in order to control for its impact on turnout across the elections.

The dependent variable in these regressions is turnout. This dummy variable records whether a respondent reports having voted in the "current" election; thus, there are only two values for this variable – 0 if the respondent did not vote, and 1, if he or she reports having voted. In the 1993 survey, respondents are asked directly whether or not they participated – their respondent is directly transcribed in order to perform the regression. In the remaining years, the choice "did not vote" was offered when respondents were asked "who did you vote for?" In these cases, any response other than "did not vote" is coded as 1; respondents who responded "did not vote" were coded as 0.

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[3] While changing the question used to construct our index may affect our voter efficacy coefficient independent of electoral reform, the minimal variation from year to year in opinions about whether votes counted necessitated the use of a second question to construct a more variable index. Unfortunately, there was no other question regarding feelings of efficacy that was included on all six surveys. Thus, it was necessary instead to use two different questions, both of which address the topic of voter efficacy.

Findings

Our first hypothesis suggested that aggregate levels of voter turnout and voter efficacy will move together across elections. The second suggests that for the elections between 1990 and 2005, both efficacy and turnout will peak at the time of the 1996 election given the move to MMP and the subsequent unhappiness with government coalitions. As shown in Figure 1, both hypotheses appear in general to be supported. Voter efficacy and turnout follow the same basic pattern over time: both holding relatively steady from 1990 to 1996, and dropping off thereafter. There are two exceptions to this common trend: turnout rises by only a slight margin in 1996, while voter efficacy holds steady, and while turnout increases in 2005, efficacy remains at 2002 levels. Such small gains in turnout in 1996 could reflect the fact that turnout had relatively little room to grow in 1996; it was already at just over 85 percent in 1993.

(Figure 1 about here)

Voter turnout does not fall consistently. Turnout peaks in 1996, falling below 1990 levels in 1999. Unlike efficacy, however, this falls lasts only until 2002, after which levels climb slightly in 2005. In the 2005 election, voter turnout is nevertheless at its lowest level in the period under study, coming in at just over 80 percent.

While these data provide support for the claim that the shift to PR did not follow predictions, they cannot, however, tie vote efficacy to voter turnout directly, despite the relatively similar trajectory both have taken during the years under study here. Regression analysis is necessary to determine whether efficacy and turnout work together at the individual level. Table 1 provides the results of the regression analyses on voter turnout for six New Zealand elections, two under SMP (1990 and 1993) and four under MMP (1996, 1999, 2002 and 2005).

(Table 1 about here)

According to the regression analyses, feelings of voter efficacy are positively related to voter turnout, as expected. Though vote efficacy has only a relatively weak effect on turnout, producing a coefficient of only 0.032 at its peak, the introduction of MMP in 1996 corresponds with a significant change in the effects of efficacy. Hanging around 0.030 in 1990 and 1993, the coefficient drops significantly to 0.015 in 1996. This is consistent with the previous observation that turnout grew in 1996, while feelings of efficacy held constant. Staying near that level in 1999 and 2002, efficacy has a much weaker correlation with turnout in the first three post-reform elections. In 2005, the importance of vote efficacy returns to its pre-reform level. This observation is consistent with the hypothesis that feelings vote efficacy would have a weaker effect on turnout after electoral reform given changing perceptions regarding the impact of voting. Efficacy appears to matter less for whether an individual will turn out to vote under the more proportional electoral system, at least until 2005.

Party identification provided an additional hypothesis in our analysis. First we hypothesized that voters who identified with third parties would have a disincentive to vote under the SMP electoral system given the decreased proportionality of votes to seats. Under MMP, however, the disincentive would decline as even minor parties would be awarded seats that better reflected the share of the vote earned. The results here suggest that this might be the case. In the 1990 election, voters who identified with third parties were significantly less likely to vote; in none of the remaining post-reform elections does identification with a third party significantly reduce the

likelihood of voting compared to identification with other parties or no identification at all.

We also hypothesized that identification with a coalition party would have no effect upon voter turnout – although identifying with a governing party may theoretically provide the incentive necessary to participate, New Zealand's wearisome experience with coalition government may have provided an opposing disincentive. Because there were no governing coalitions prior to 1996, we may only observe the results in 1999 through 2005. As expected, there is no statistically significant effect for this measure.

The strength of party identification is positively and significantly associated with turnout in each of the elections in the period under study. And while there are minor shifts across the elections in the strength of this association, only in the last election is the change substantial enough to lie outside the margin of error when compared to all but the results for the 1990 election. The data hint at a downward trend in the importance of strength of party identification up to the 1996 election and an increase in each subsequent election from that point on. If electoral reform had an impact on the importance of strength of party identification for turnout, the effect was gone within three elections.

The final hypotheses related to the effects of electoral reform on voters with differing levels of electoral experience. Novice voters, we hypothesized, might exhibit differing trends in turnout given their decreased likelihood of having formed an electoral 'habit.' Looking at the coefficients for the cohort dummy variables, the results clearly suggest that there are cohort effects in turnout – such differences are demonstrated in Figure 2. In every election but 1990, younger respondents are less likely turn out to vote in elections than older ones[4]. But our interest lies in examining how the youngest cohort responded to electoral reform.

(Figure 2 about here)

Figure 2 suggests that the youngest group of voters was less responsive to electoral reform than other voters. Although turnout increased in all cohorts in 1996, its drop in 1999 was significant among the youngest group of voters. And only one cohort records an overall drop in turnout between 1990 and 2005: the youngest. The regression results confirm this pattern, while controlling for the effects of the other independent variables in the analyses.

Discussion

The evidence suggests that electoral reform may not result in the behavioural changes observed in cross-national studies of electoral systems. The case of New Zealand's adaptation to MMP demonstrates that behaviour *may* change in the aftermath of reform, but such change may not be consistent with expectations forecasted by the literature. For instance, aggregate turnout and feelings of vote efficacy are typically higher in PR systems than under SMP, so one would expect the switch from one to the other to result in increases in both. In New Zealand, however, both turnout and efficacy dropped after the first election held under PR, likely as a result of disappointment with the coalition governments of 1996 and 1999.

Our first two hypotheses are both based upon the assumption that New Zealanders were unhappy

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[4] This exception is very likely an effect of sample size. In 1990, only 100 respondents were born after 1970, whereas every other cohort consisted of nearly 400 or more respondents.

with coalitions developed without regard for vote preferences. Although PR is thought to promote turnout and feelings of efficacy because it allows more voters to feel as if they are influencing the composition of legislatures and governments, the coalitions in New Zealand did not necessarily have their consent, resulting in subsequent drops in turnout levels.

The first hypothesis was partially confirmed. Turnout did climb to a peak in 1996; aggregate voter efficacy, however, plateaued starting in 1990, and dropped after 1996. The second hypothesis does not hold up so well; though both turnout and efficacy fall between 1990 and 2005, they plot a different course in doing so. Average voter efficacy stays constant between 1990 and 1996, drops leading into 1999, and stays nearly constant between 1999 and 2005[5]. Voter turnout, on the other hand, fluctuates, increasing in 1996, dropping steadily until 2002, and rebounding slightly in 2005.

A similar effect is also evident in the regression analyses. In the first three post-reform elections, efficacy has a much weaker effect on turnout than in 1990, 1993, and even in 2005, when turnout rebounded. This decoupling suggests that PR systems may encourage turnout independently of the effects of efficacy.

The case of 2005 is interesting, however. Not only did turnout rebound slightly, the results of regression analysis demonstrate a renewed correlation between efficacy and voting. A possibility is that after three elections, citizens had adjusted to MMP, as Taagepera had suggested, and those who had previously turned-out due to the novelty of the system may have determined that this new system was no different than SMP, decided to stay home, and left only the more efficacious to cast their ballots.

The 2005 election was more competitive, however, than any election since 1996. After the unpopularity of the 1996 coalition government of National and New Zealand First, the National Party collapsed; victories for Labour were the foregone conclusion of the writs dropped in 1999 and 2002. The general election of 2005 marked a return for the National Party, and that campaign was seen as a true competition, the first in nearly a decade (Geddis 2005).

After dropping in importance in the three post-reform elections, the strength of party identification also becomes a stronger predictor of turnout in 2005. The increased correlation between strength of party identification and turnout indicates that those with strong ties with parties are more likely to vote. People with weak ties may have previously turned out 1996, 1999, and 2002, but by 2005 they were less likely to bother. Now, consider that these governing partnerships included more parties than the typical governing coalition. The coalitions in 1996 and 1999 consisted of two parties. In 2002 and 2005, the Labour government counted on the support of four different parties, depending upon the initiative being pursued.

Karp and Banducci (1999) suggest that PR boosted turnout because it allowed more parties to successfully influence policy, which in turn meant that even those with weak party identification had an incentive to participate. Given that these partnerships gave more parties a stake in the process, we should expect the same results – that is, if the partnerships are affecting voter turnout, we should expect that the strength of party identification should be weaker in 2005 than during the previous elections. Since the correlation is *stronger*, however, it is likely that the novelty of MMP has simply worn off among those with weaker party ties.

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[5] This may possibly be an effect of the different questions used to create the indices used over those time periods.

The general election of 2005 also saw variation in the effect of experience on voter turnout. This election saw the youngest cohort participating at a rate much closer to that of their elders than in any other election under investigation. But this stems in part from the fact that the youngest group's turnout fell dramatically in the election after reform while that in the remaining cohorts did not. It isn't until 2005 that the similar sized drops in turnout are recorded for the older cohorts. This might be indicative of their lack of voting experience or perhaps of their having invested less in the reforms than older groups. In the end, the honeymoon period for the youngest voters was very short lived.

Conclusion

Our intent was to investigate why voter turnout in New Zealand dropped after reform rather than increased, as would have been predicted by the literature. To do so, we compared the pre-reform elections of 1990 and 1993 to the first four post-reform elections held in 1996, 1999, 2002, and 2005. The hypothesis that predicted that aggregate efficacy and turnout would follow a similar trajectory from election to election was not supported. Although both peaked in 1996, as predicted by the second hypotheses, both underwent changes from election-to election. Voter turnout tended to oscillate downward between 1990 and 2005, whereas efficacy remained constant between 1990 and 1996 and between 1999 and 2005, but dropped sharply between 1996 and 1999.

The third hypothesis stated that the effect of voter efficacy on turnout would be weaker after reform, a prediction confirmed by the analysis. However, the effect of efficacy grew over the first three post-reform elections, and by the fourth election in 2005 had returned to pre-reform levels. Hypotheses four and five were also confirmed, as party identification was not a statistically significant predictor of turnout in New Zealand after the introduction of MMP.

Despite the insignificance of the party identified, the strength of any party identification was found to be a significant predictor of turnout. Although it was hypothesized that the strength of party identification would become irrelevant after 1996, we found that although it changed only slightly in each subsequent election after reform, by 2005 its effect was significantly strongly than it had been pre-reform.

The final hypotheses, regarding newer voters, were also not supported. Although we anticipated that turnout among young voters might increase over time, new voters tended to follow the same turnout patterns as more experienced ones. The one exception was in the much shorter turnout 'honeymoon' among this group than others.

There appear to be two key elections, however, in this analysis: the general elections of 1996 and 2005. The significance of the 1996 election is obvious; it was the first election administered under the MMP system. As a result, it had a significant effect on turnout in New Zealand – not only did it serve to boost turnout, but it also served as a turning point. Voters were unhappy with the results of coalition government in 1996, turnout began to decline in the following elections, and the relationships between efficacy and strength of party identification increased in strength. Electoral reform *did* influence all of these factors, but not necessarily as was hypothesized.

However, the election of 2005 may mark the beginning of the lasting effects of electoral reform. By 2005, the fourth election under MMP, the parties began to compete differently than before and voter turnout began to grow. The effects of a new electoral system may not be entirely

evident until after three elections have been held; perhaps the changes witnessed in 2005 are the first reflection of this new system, in which age matters less to turnout, but efficacy and party identification strength matter more. It may be necessary to examine New Zealand again after a few more elections in order to confirm these effects.
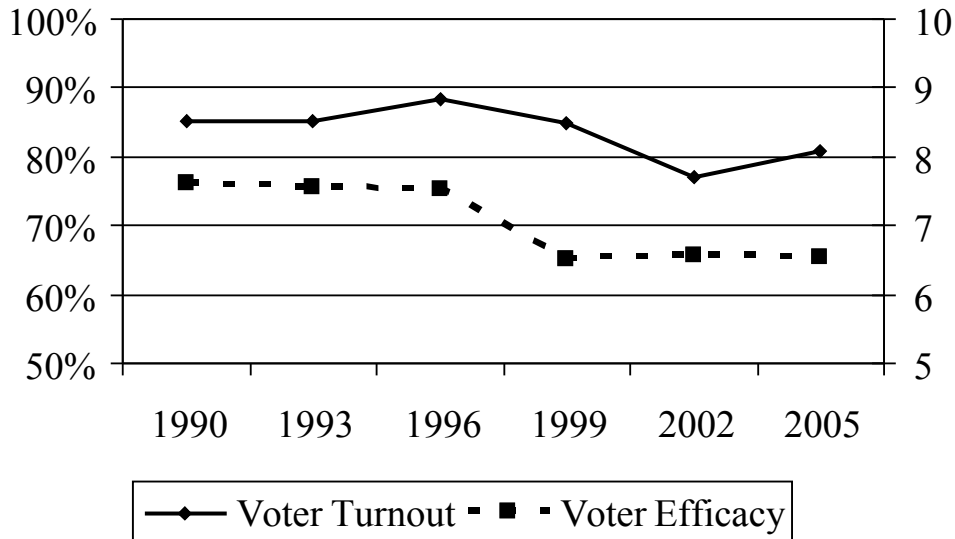
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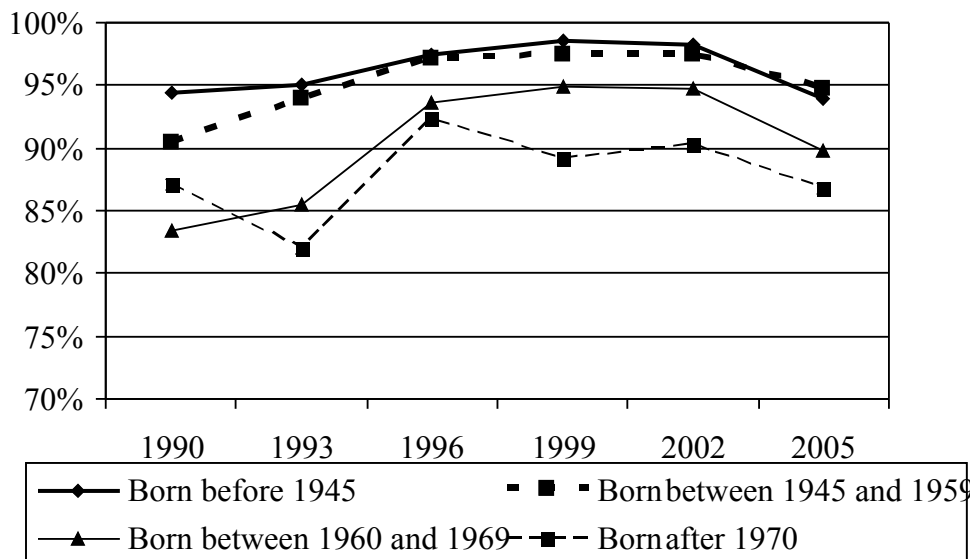
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Figure 1: Voter Turnout (Official) and Average Vote Efficacy, 1990 to 2005

Figure 2: Voter Turnout by Age Cohort, 1990-2005

Table 1: Determinants of Voter Turnout in New Zealand elections,1990-2005

	1990		1993		1996		1999		2002		2005	
	B	**s.e.**	**B**	**s.e.**	**B**	**s.e.**	**B**	**s.e.**	**B**	**s.e.**	**B**	**s.e.**
Born Between 1945 to 1959	**-0.035***	0.016	-0.005	0.013	-0.008	0.009	**-0.021***	0.008	**-0.020***	0.010	0.013	0.017
Born Between 1960 and 1969	**-0.097*****	0.019	**-0.086*****	0.017	**-0.061*****	0.011	**-0.049*****	0.009	**-0.041*****	0.011	-0.026	0.018
After 1970	-0.034	0.034	**-0.099*****	0.024	**-0.079*****	0.014	**-0.102*****	0.011	**-0.109*****	0.012	**-0.053****	0.017
Vote Efficacy	**0.032*****	0.005	**0.028*****	0.004	**0.015*****	0.003	**0.018*****	0.002	**0.020*****	0.003	**0.035*****	0.004
ID w Coalition	--	--	--	--	--	--	-0.004	0.009	-0.017	0.011	-0.015	0.015
ID w Third Party	**-0.070***	0.031	-0.006	0.022	-0.020	0.011	-0.002	0.014	-0.016	0.016	-0.011	0.023
ID Strength	**0.036*****	0.007	**0.027*****	0.006	**0.017*****	0.004	**0.023*****	0.004	**0.029*****	0.005	**0.050*****	0.006
Education	**0.010****	0.003	**0.012*****	0.003	**0.011*****	0.002	**0.007***	0.003	**0.007****	0.002	**0.008***	0.003
Constant	**0.648*****	0.038	**0.680*****	0.031	**0.788*****	0.021	**0.810*****	0.019	**0.783*****	0.020	**0.608*****	0.030
N	2042		2204		4911		5875		5555		2743	
Adjusted R^2	0.077		0.074		0.041		0.053		0.058		0.085	

Note: * indicates results are significant at the 0.05 level; ** at the 0.01 level; and *** at the 0.001 level.
Source: New Zealand Election Study Survey Results, 1990 – 2005