

MMP and women's political representation in New Zealand

Key points from a report by Ana Gilling and Sandra Grey

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Political Rights for Women

New Zealanders are proud of their history as the first nation in the world where women won the right to vote. Since 1893 the achievement of the suffragists has become part of our national identity and is often presented as a demonstration of our commitment to equality and fairness. But have we built on the suffragists' vision of political equality and representation of 'women's views'?

From votes to 'standing as' women representatives

While women gained the right to vote in New Zealand in 1893, it was not until 1919 that women won the right to stand for parliament. From that time, until the late 20th century, progress was relatively slow, with the numbers of women in parliament remaining in single digit figures for most of the century.

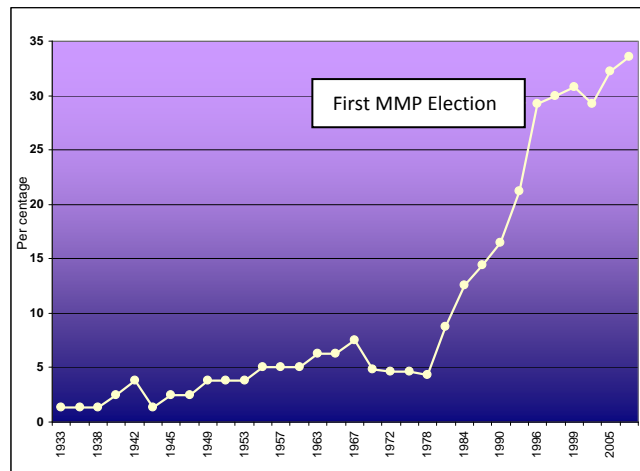
Table 1: New Zealand Women's Political Rights and Representation

	Event
1893	Votes for all women
1919	Women's right to stand for parliament
1933	First woman elected to parliament
1947	First woman in Cabinet
1993	First woman party leader
1997	First woman Prime Minister

MMP means more women

100 years after suffragists won the right to vote, New Zealanders voted to change their first-past-the-post electoral system to MMP. One of the most visible changes following the introduction of MMP was the increase in numbers of women in parliament. In the final first-past-the post election 21% of parliamentary seats were won by women. In 1996 under MMP, women held 29% of the seats in parliament.

Figure 1: The Percentage of Women in the NZ House of Representatives from 1972

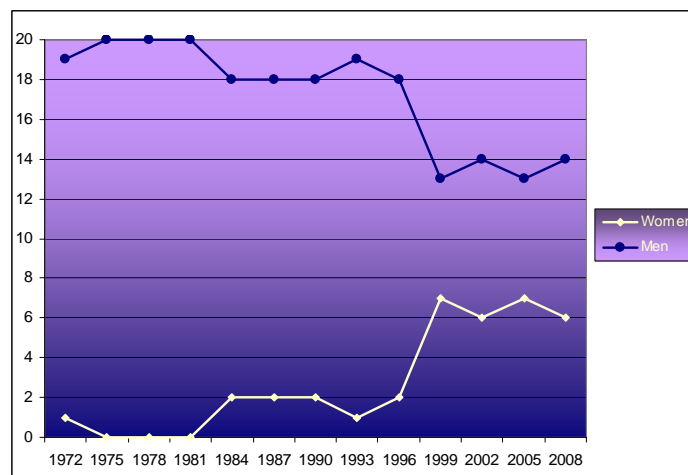


There has also been improved representation for Maori, Pacific Island people, and other under represented group.

The changes in the New Zealand arena are similar to global trends. International research shows that the type of electoral system used will impact upon levels of 'minority' representation in parliament (Rule and Zimmerman, 1994). In particular it is acknowledged that proportional representation (PR) facilitates the entry of women in parliaments in established democracies (See Darcy, Welch, and Clark, 1994; Bird, 2003).

A spin-off from the increased numbers of women in parliament has been a rise in the number of women in Cabinet.

Figure 2: Women in the New Zealand Cabinet 1972 to 2008



While the number of female politicians has risen, political parties are still the main barrier to women's political representation. For example, after the 1999 election, over

a third of Labour MPs but less than a quarter of National's MPs were women. On the party lists women had been allocated 40% of the top 20 Labour positions but only 30% of the top 20 National positions.

Consider the placement of women in the top ten of selected political party lists for the 2005 and 2008 elections.

Table 3: The Number of Women in the Top Ten Positions on New Zealand Political Party Lists in 2005 and 2008

Party	2005	2008
ACT	4	2
Greens	5	5
Labour	4	4
Maori Party	4	5
National	1	2
New Zealand First	2	1
Progressives	3	4
United Future	2	2

With MMP New Zealand has taken another step towards political equality for women, but these gains then raise the question of whether the election of women will “make a difference” in the outcomes of political debate.

MMP Means Making a Difference

Women can only have an influence when they have the numbers. When you have the influence is when you have the votes. Dianne Yates, MP, 1999.

A belief that women will make a difference once in parliament is based on the idea that the messenger as well as the message is important in political spaces (Catt 2003).

Female politicians themselves acknowledge the significance of women in parliament and MMP when it comes to debating issues of concern to women. For example, in debates on parental tax credits MP Christine Fletcher noted:

I think the fact that we are debating this is a measure of the success of MMP. A lot of people would criticise it, but there is a greater number of women in Parliament, and that allows us—as we approach the new millennium—to finally begin to debate some of the issues, which I see as the hard issues.

And in the 2001 Paid Parental Leave Act debates Alliance MP Liz Gordon stated:

I was going to start by celebrating MMP and saying how great it was that MMP had brought more women into the House, and that in particular in this instance it has brought in the Hon. Laila Harre, who is herself the mother of young children.

Another way to evaluate the influence of women is to look at ‘women-friendly’ legislation passed by governments. Since the introduction of MMP, a range of “women’s issues” have been introduced onto the parliamentary agenda by third parties, list MPs, or coalition governments’ including:

- Paid Parental Leave in 2002
- The establishment of an Equal Employment Commissioner
- Flexible working hours legislation in 2005
- Establishment of a Commissioner of Children
- Repeal of Section 59 of the Crimes Act

A review of Bills indicates that women politicians, particularly those who are from minor parties, will represent women by introducing into parliament women-friendly legislation – though the fate of that legislation has not always been positive.

In a similar vein, examining spending on “women’s health” in New Zealand since 1990 signals that increased spending on “women’s programmes” occurs alongside increased female representation.

Conclusion

This quick review illustrates the positive impact of MMP on women’s representation in terms of increasing the number of women in parliament (and as a result, in government and Cabinet). It also points to a range of ways in which it is likely increased numbers of female MPs brought in because of MMP has led to politicians acting “in the interests of women”.

The electoral referendum in 2011 gambles with the gains we have made in women’s political representation. If New Zealand moves back to first-past-the-post or to another majority-plurality system, like supplementary member, we will almost certainly see a drop in the number of women in parliament. We would be moving away from the vision of Kate Sheppard and those women who fought convention and braved criticism to advance the position of women in the 19th century.

We must continue the fight for women’s political equality begun over a century ago and ask New Zealanders to ensure they retain an electoral system that ensures democracy for women.

For the full report go to the Campaign for MMP website: www.campaignformmp.org.nz