

THIS IS HOW NEW ZEALAND FIXED ITS VOTING SYSTEM

The Kiwis can teach Cascadia a thing or two.



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This article is part of the series [Archaic Election Methods Cripple Democracy](#)

Changing to a more representative electoral system makes so much sense, and yet it can be such a heavy lift. After even Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [backed away](#) from a public promise to end first-past-the-post voting in Canada, Cascadian reformers may despair of ever prying the cold dead hands of 18th century voting off of our democracy.

But there is hope! Like Canada, the United States, and other former British colonies, the country of New Zealand once elected legislative representatives from [single-member districts](#), with the expected [majoritarian](#) results: two-party politics and underrepresentation of women and people of color. But in the 1990s, voters opted to switch to a fairer electoral system called [Mixed Member Proportional \(MMP\)](#). Immediately, they saw a [more diverse, representative](#) parliament.

Why MMP worked for NZ

Mixed Member Proportional Voting was attractive to New Zealanders because it is a hybrid of the system they were used to (single-member districts where voters can elect a geographically local representative) and a system with regional or national representatives selected from party lists. Voters get two votes: one for their local representative, and one for their favorite party ([read more about it in Sightline's Glossary](#)).

Mixed Member Proportional, with its familiar local representatives and simple ballot, could be attractive to Cascadians voters, too. The Kiwis did it, and so can we. [British Columbians especially](#), now pledged to complete electoral reform, may be keen to hear how New Zealanders designed and passed theirs.

A failing system prompted a study

In the late 1970s and early '80s, three New Zealand elections produced unfair results. In [1978](#) and

1981, one party won more votes, but the other party won more seats in the legislature ([sound familiar?](#)). In 1984, a small right-wing third party ran *just* to [pull votes away from the right-wing major party](#). In all three elections, voters were feeling fed up with the two major parties ([sound familiar, United States?](#)), and many voted for third parties. Voters grew even more infuriated when their votes had no effect: despite winning between 16 and 21 percent of the vote, third parties only won one or two out of 95 seats each year.

Finally, legislators agreed to set up a commission to look into the problem of their unfair electoral system. In 1985, the [Royal Commission on the Electoral Systems](#) studied many [alternative ways of voting](#), including Preferential Voting, Single Non-Transferable Vote, [Cumulative](#) Voting, [Limited](#) Voting, [Approval](#) Voting, [Mixed Member Proportional](#), Supplemental Member, and [Single Transferable Vote](#). The following year, the Commission issued its [report](#), unanimously recommending [Mixed Member Proportional](#) Voting for New Zealand.

Legislators took the public's temperature

A whopping 85 percent of voters said they wanted to change the system.



Unsurprisingly, neither of the two major parties was excited by the idea of changing the electoral system that elected them. But with the Royal Commission's recommendations echoing in the public sphere, each party tried to outdo the other by promising, [during the 1990 campaign](#), to hold a referendum on electoral reform if it gained power. Once the National Party won the election, it tried to walk back its electoral reform promises ([sound familiar, Canada?](#)), but public pressure persisted and the parliament grudgingly agreed to hold an ["indicative" \(non-binding\) referendum in 1992](#).

The referendum [asked voters](#) if they wanted to retain First-Past-the-Post voting or change the system. The party in power promised that, if a majority of voters wanted to change, it would put a binding referendum on the ballot the next year. A whopping 85 percent of voters said they wanted to change the system.

The non-binding referendum also asked which of four systems voters would choose to replace first-past-the-post, and the party in power agreed to put the top vote-getter on the ballot the next year. Voters trusted the Royal Commission: 65 percent chose Mixed Member Proportional voting.

Voters had their say

Having faced an increasingly frustrated public for more than a decade, elected officials could drag their feet no longer. They finally delivered on their promise of a national binding referendum on

electoral reform. [New Zealand](#), like [Canada](#) but unlike the United States, allows the legislature to refer important issues to the people for a vote. (Thanks to the [Citizens Initiated Referendum Act of 1993](#), New Zealand is one of just three countries in the world that also allows citizen-initiated referenda. The other two are Switzerland and Italy.)

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In 1993, a general election year in New Zealand, voters had the chance to vote on a [binding national referendum](#) on the voting system. Businesses poured money into a full-throated campaign against Mixed Member Proportional voting, with political and business leaders saying it would “bring chaos” and would be “a catastrophic disaster for democracy.” (The main opponents of proportional representation are typically the two major parties that benefit from winner-take-all, majoritarian elections, plus the interests—in this case, business—that benefit from their rule.) The pro-reform campaign had little cash but a populist wind at its back: voters [disillusioned with the political class were ready for change](#) (sound familiar, United States?). [Eighty-five percent](#) of voters came out to vote, and electoral reform won with 54 percent.

The National (right wing) party called another national referendum to get rid of Mixed Member Proportional voting in 2011, but [58 percent of voters wanted to keep it](#). Once given a taste of fairer voting, New Zealanders refused to go back.

Parties proliferated

Political scientists have known for nearly a century that plurality voting in [single-member districts](#) leads to two-party domination. They even have a name for the phenomenon—[Duverger’s Law](#). New Zealand was no exception; the Labour (left) and National (right) parties dominated the legislature.

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As soon as the country moved away from first-past-the-post voting, Kiwis experienced a menu of party options, as well as confidence that they could vote for a smaller party without throwing their vote away. Instead of dominating nearly 100 percent of the seats, the two large parties now win around two-thirds together. The Green Party, the Maori party, the NZ First party (right-wing nationalists), and others together win around one-third of seats.

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Maoris win more seats

Since the Maori Representation Act of 1867, Maori—the indigenous people of New Zealand, making up about [11 percent of the population](#)—were guaranteed four seats (out of about 90) in the

Parliament. Since 1975, Maori people can [choose whether to enroll](#) to vote for the Maori seats or for the general seats. (Prior to that, they could only vote for the designated [Maori seats](#).) Some argued that the designated Maori seats should be eliminated when New Zealand moved to proportional voting, but the Maori managed to retain them. All voters now cast one vote for their district representative and one for their preferred party, meaning [voters on the Maori rolls](#) could cast a vote for their Maori district representative and one for the Maori Party, and voters on the general rolls could cast one vote for their district representative and one for their party. Proportional voting has helped them increase their share of Parliamentary seats from 4 or 5 percent before proportional voting to between 13 and 19 percent since.

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Women win more seats and more leadership positions

Prior to proportional voting, women won between one and 16 percent of seats, except for a high of 21 percent in 1993, the year that voters approved a change to the electoral system and adopted citizen-led initiatives. Since New Zealand instituted proportional voting, women have consistently made up about one-third of Parliament. Much of [women's gains come from the Party List seats](#)—more than [40 percent of representatives elected from party lists are women](#), compared with just [15 percent](#) from the single-member districts. One of the reasons for the discrepancy is that small, left-leaning parties tend to put women in their top spots.

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While one-third is not gender parity, it may have brought women to the [critical mass](#) where they start to have more power. Indeed, women have expanded their role on the leadership [Cabinet](#) from zero in most years before the referendum to seven, eight, or nine of 27 in recent years.

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What Cascadia can learn

Change is hard, especially for those who benefit from the status quo, such as parties that are able to win more seats than their votes because of a flawed electoral system. Having a trusted commission study the problem can help instill confidence that a different system could work better.

British Columbia has already conducted a citizen-led study that recommended Single Transferable Vote. Oregon or Washington could similarly assemble a group of diverse citizens to carefully consider options for the states' electoral methods and make recommendations.

Finally, because legislators are reluctant to change the system that elected them, the path to electoral reform is likely through a referendum or initiative. Once implemented, though, voters will

see both more power in their vote and more diverse representation in their legislature—and they may never look back.

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