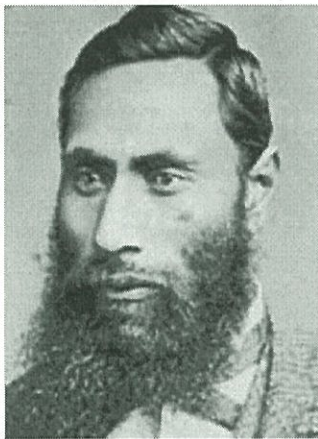


Māori and the Vote

(Electoral Commission, 2005b)



Māori polling booth at
Te Whaiti, Urewera.
Detail?



Hori Kerei Taiaroa
Detail?



Māori voters in
Rotorua. Detail?

The involvement of the indigenous Māori people in New Zealand's electoral system is one of the remarkable stories of New Zealand's political history.

As at date of publication
Archive

New Zealand's 1853 electoral franchise was theoretically 'colour-blind'. But in reality very few Māori could qualify under the property requirement because they possessed their lands communally (as iwi, hapu or whanau groups) and not under individual freehold or leasehold title like Europeans. In 1859 the British Crown Law office confirmed that **Māori could not vote unless they had individual title** granted by the Crown.

European colonists generally welcomed this state of affairs, because they did not think Māori were yet 'civilised' enough to exercise such an important responsibility. They were also worried that if large numbers of Māori were enrolled, they could 'swamp' the votes of settlers in many North Island electorates.

In any case, in the 1850s and 1860s few Māori were interested in the 'Pakeha Parliament' - they preferred to deal directly with the Governor (and the Queen)



James Carroll Detail?



Eruera Tirikatene.
Detail?

Read more about
these people - and
many others - at the
[Dictionary of New
Zealand Biography](#):

Did you know...?

In 1853 about 100 Māori
(mostly tribal leaders) were
enrolled to vote - out of a
total electorate of 5,849.

Māori Representation

After much debate, in **1867 Parliament agreed to set up four electorates specifically for Māori.**

This solution was similar to the 'special representation' introduced for gold miners earlier that decade.

To avoid difficulties with property ownership, **all Māori men over 21 were eligible to vote** (and stand for Parliament).

Did you know..?

As a result of the 1867

or, like the **Kingitanga movement**, create their own political structures.

During the wars of the early 1860s, however, some European politicians argued that it was vital to assimilate Māori into the political mainstream to ensure lasting peace between the two races. They were also keen to reward those Māori tribes who had fought alongside the Crown.

The small number of Māori who owned

legislation, Māori men achieved universal suffrage 12 years before European men.

individual freehold land were still allowed to vote in the European electorates. This

'dual vote' would survive until 1893.

On the other hand, four seats was a fairly modest concession: on a per capita basis at that time, Māori deserved 14 to 16 members (Europeans then had 72). In addition, the arrangement was to be temporary, lasting only five years. Most politicians expected that in due course Māori would own or rent land as individuals and the seats could be done away with.

However, it soon became clear that this process - the 'individualisation' of Māori land ownership - would take much longer. The experiment was extended in 1872 and **in 1876 the Māori seats were established on a permanent basis.**

By that time some of the Māori members of Parliament were pressing for an increase in the number of seats, not only to better represent their population but also to reduce the size of their huge electorates. It would be more than a century, however, before these efforts were successful.

Very few Māori took part in the first elections, held in 1868, but interest began to grow in the 1870s and 1880s. The government tried to bring all tribes into the system by establishing polling booths in areas like

Counting Trees

In 1890 the government decided to set up a polling station at **Maungapohatu**, deep in the Urewera ranges, an area largely inaccessible to Europeans. After trekking for six days through thick bush and mist, the returning officer, J. T. Large, arrived to find that most of the people had left for Whakatane. Those that remained told him that he would 'get no votes except those of the trees standing round', but he eventually persuaded some men to cast votes. Despite getting lost and injuring his foot, Large declared his 14-day round trip had achieved its aim of 'maintaining friendly relations' with 'this isolated tribe'.

the King Country and Urewera.

Law changes in 1893 and 1896 completed the almost total separation of the Māori and European electoral systems. From then until 1975 only so-called 'half-castes' were allowed to choose which seats they wished to vote in.

A Victim of Neglect?

Once established, the Māori system largely suffered from official neglect. Although the secret ballot was introduced in European seats in 1870, it was not considered suitable for Māori elections. Māori continued to vote under the old **verbal system** - in which electors told the polling official who they wanted to vote for - until the 1938 election.

There were also no electoral rolls for the Māori seats. Electoral officials had always argued that it would be too difficult to register Māori voters (supposedly because of difficulties with language, literacy and proof of identity). Despite frequent allegations of electoral irregularities in the Māori seats, rolls were not introduced until 1948-9.

In the 1950s and 1960s the National government occasionally talked of abolishing the Māori seats. Some politicians described special representation as a form of '**apartheid**', like in South Africa. But as most Māori continued to support their existence, no serious attempts were made to eliminate the seats.

Did you know...?

From 1896 up until 1967 Māori (except 'half-castes') were not allowed to stand as candidates in European seats. The law was changed that year, but it was not until 1975, when National's Ben Couch (for Wairarapa) and Rex Austin (for Awarua) were elected, that Māori were successful in 'general' electorates (as 'European'

In 1975 the Labour government introduced a 'Māori electoral option', to be held alongside (or following) each census. This allowed electors of Māori descent to choose whether they enrolled in general or Māori seats. In 1976, however, the newly elected National government decided

seats were now known).

that the number of
Māori seats was to

remain fixed at four - whatever the outcome of the subsequent options.

The Māori Seats Under MMP

The Royal Commission on the Electoral System in 1985-6 gave considerable thought to the future of the Māori seats. It concluded that the seats had not helped Māori and that they would achieve better representation through a proportional party-list system. The Commission therefore recommended that if the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system was adopted, the Māori seats should be abolished.

As the prospect of electoral reform became more real in 1992-3, some Māori began to rally to the defence of the seats. Eventually, following strong representations from Māori organisations, the seats were retained under the new MMP system. **Their number was allowed to increase or decrease according to the results of the regular Māori electoral option.**

Before the first MMP election in 1996 the number of Māori seats was increased, for the first time in their 129-year history, to five. In 2002 there were seven.

The Māori electoral system 'stumbled into being' in the 1860s as a solution to a supposedly temporary 'problem'. Its appropriateness and effectiveness have been the subject of debate ever since.

Nevertheless, the Māori seats have survived to become one of the most distinctive features of New Zealand's electoral system.

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seats was to
remain at four - whereas the number of
seats was now twenty.

The Motor Seats Project

The Royal Commission on the Electoral System
in 1902 gave consideration to the
the Motor Seats Project. It concluded that
as it was not the best plan and that the
costs were too high. The Commission
recommended that the Motor Seats Project
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