

MANA RANGATAHI

‡ THE REFERENDUM ON THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Veronica MH Tawhai¹

Introduction

At the end of 2009, shortly after the New Zealand Government announced a referendum on the electoral system, 46 rangatahi Māori/Māori youth participated in a research project about being prepared and confident to participate in electoral activities. The following is a summary of the project, and the insights offered by rangatahi about how they (and others like them) can feel informed and empowered come decision-making time.²



BACKGROUND

When the new National government came into power, one of the things they committed to was getting New Zealanders to have their say on the electoral system.³ As a result, in 2011, at the same time as the General Election, New Zealanders are going to be asked two questions:

- (1) If they wish to keep the electoral system we have, the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system, or want it to be changed, and;
- (2) If we did have a change, what system they would like instead: First Past the Post (FPP), Preferential Vote (PV), Single Transferable Vote (STV) or Supplementary Member (SM).

Being able to get involved in political decision-making is important to every citizen's wellbeing.⁴ Yet, all over the world, youth⁵ and especially indigenous/native youth⁶ are often left out. In Aotearoa, 51% of Māori who do not vote are between 20 and 30 years of age.⁷ This is not only bad for rangatahi Māori as citizens, but for the 'equal citizenship' promised them under the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi.



Although it is not the only problem, a lack of relevant information is one thing that stops rangatahi from participating. To address this, a research project was designed to see what type of education might help rangatahi Māori, if they wanted to, to participate in the referendum in a way that is meaningful.

THE PROJECT

In this project, 46 rangatahi Māori between the ages of 18 and 30 years old took an anonymous on-line survey about electoral activities and education. Because of the popularity of the internet, an online survey was thought to be easy-to-use and attractive to rangatahi. Web-based initiatives are also being used more and more in Māori development,⁸ and on-line technologies are seen as one way to increase the involvement of rangatahi Māori,⁹ other young New Zealanders¹⁰ and young people all over the world¹¹ in politics.

Of the 46 participants: 46% (or 21 participants) were 26-30 years of age, 39% (or 18) were 21-25 years of age, and 15% (or 7 participants) were 18-20 years of age; 56% (or 26 participants) worked full-time, 26% (or 12 participants) were students, and 18% (or 8 participants) were full-time parents/caregivers.



After some general questions about gender, age and occupation, rangatahi were asked 14 questions about the referendum and electoral education: 7 multiple-choice questions and 7 short answer questions. The language used in the survey hoped to help rangatahi feel comfortable with the project - as well as *yes* and *no* answers, options such as *hell no!*, *sort of*, *could be* and *maybe?* were included. The 7 short answer questions also gave some space for rangatahi to write their answers, but not so much as to pressure them to write a long answer.

RANGATAHI THOUGHTS AND EXPERIENCES

Rangatahi answers were grouped into five topics: (1) Awareness about the Referendum on the Electoral System, (2) Knowledge and Confidence about the Current Electoral System, (3) Maori Electoral Representation, (4) Electoral Education Sources, and (5) Electoral Education Content.

1. Awareness about the Referendum on the Electoral System

Half of the rangatahi participants had not heard about the referendum on the electoral system, with a quarter saying *yes* they had heard, and another quarter saying they had *maybe* heard about it. Three quarters of rangatahi knew what a referendum was, with just under half being able to provide a description. The recent referendum on Section 59 of the Crimes Act (the 'Anti-Smacking' bill) was talked about by rangatahi, showing that knowledge is affected by current affairs:

"I think it's like a re-do of a law kind of, to make sure that we want that law in government? Like the smacking-ban referendum we did not long ago?" (18-20 year old student)

2. Knowledge and Confidence about the Current Electoral System

68% of rangatahi identified MMP as our current electoral system, while 7% identified another system (FPP or STV), and 25% stated they weren't sure. Half of the 18-20 year olds knew it was MMP, while this made up 80% of the 26-30 year old group, showing you're more likely to know if you're older and have participated in an election before.



When told it was MMP, rangatahi were asked if they felt they knew enough to confidently make a decision in the upcoming referendum. Overall, 19% said *yes*, 37% said *no*, 21% said *hell no* and 23% said *sort of*. Although more 26-30 year olds had said they were aware of MMP, the number saying they didn't feel confident was the same as the other age groups, showing there is not necessarily a connection between knowing what the system is and feeling confident about it.

3. Maori Electoral Representation

Over three quarters (86%) of rangatahi said *yes* that Māori representation was something important to them, while 12% said it *could be* important, and 2% said *what's Māori representation?* No one choose *no, it's not important*. When asked if they'd heard anything about the pro's or con's of MMP for Māori, 63% said they *sort of* had, while 21% said *yes* they had and 16% said *no* they hadn't. When asked if information about how MMP affects Māori would have an effect on their decision in the referendum, 79% of respondents said *yes*, while 21% said *no* they

felt they still wouldn't know enough. Education on Māori-relevant information therefore could have a positive effect on rangatahi confidence to participate in an informed way.

4. Electoral Education Sources

When asked about where the information and/or knowledge they did have on the electoral system came from, rangatahi talked about the news, whānau and friends:

"Mostly TV... The orange elector guy? on the ads?" (18-20 year old student)

"News, T.V, newspaper, internet etc. Friends who are interested in politics" (21-25 year old student)

"Discussions with whānau / Reading newspapers / watching the news" (21-25 year old full-time worker)

When asked about where such information could be coming from, nearly all rangatahi felt school was an important place:

"Definitely the foundations of it need to be taught at schools. Primary (basics), Secondary (core elements), Tertiary (in-depth)" (18-20 year old student)

"Final years of secondary school would be a good place to start" (21-25 year old full-time worker)

"High School - 5th Form (or a few years before the voting age)" (26-30 year old student)

Rangatahi also felt that the media could be used more to reach youth:

"TV, Māori youth programmes etc" (21-25 year old student)

"Television, radio, internet... everywhere" (26-30 year old full-time worker)

Rangatahi also showed an interest in greater use of on-line technology:

"Internet. I read the news every day!" (21-25 year old full-time worker)

"Emails??" (21-25 year old full-time worker)

"Interactive websites" (26-30 year old full-time worker)

Rangatahi did however still value information on a face-to-face basis:

"Those promotion people that walk up to you in the plaza? you know? They could go around just asking people if they understand" (18-20 year old student)

"Youth centres, workplaces, marae, iwi" (26-30 year old full-time worker)

Overall however rangatahi just felt it was important the information came, not necessarily where it came from:

"Don't really care as long as it comes" (18-20 year old student)

"Anywhere and everywhere" (26-30 year old full-time parent/caregiver)

5. Electoral Education Content

To feel more confident when participating in electoral activities, rangatahi wanted more details on the workings of the electoral system:

"How everything actually works and what it all means" (18-20 year old full-time caregiver)

"Why it matters for one - like what will happen if we choose one or the other?" (18-20 year old student)

"What kind of system do we have now and what does the new system involve? How do decisions about the country actually get made?" (21-25 year old student)

Rangatahi also wanted to know more about Māori and electoral systems:

"More info on the Māori seats and Māori in parliament" (21-25 year old student)

"Benefits to Maori. Maori perspectives. 'All angles explored', not from one perspective" (26-30 year old full-time worker)

"Information on implications for Maori when deciding on particular issues" (26-30 year old full-time worker)

73% of rangatahi said they had not learnt anything about electoral issues like Māori representation at school, 9% said *yes* they had, while 18% said they *might have*. All thought they should have learnt more at school about electoral matters:

"Since you kind of turn 18 at the end of high school they should give the 'what's up' about it all, including its importance" (18-20 year old student)

"People should be educated about the political system before they vote. If it's not taught early in school when will it be taught?" (21-25 year old student)

Rangatahi thought learning about New Zealand's unique electoral system were more important than other topics currently taught at school:

"We need to learn more about our own political system, not dumb colonial history from England!!" (21-25 year old student)

That there were some major challenges in education, however, was recognised:

"That would be ideal wouldn't it - to have a school system that taught about social and political awareness, biculturalism and rangatiratanga, de-colonisation and conscientisation. In reality though, it is still an entity of the Crown" (26-30 year old full-time worker)

Overall, rangatahi felt that education was the key to growing their knowledge about electoral systems, which would help if they wanted to participate:

"Kids leave not knowing how important it is to vote and they can make all the difference" (18-20 year old full-time parent/caregiver)

"To enable us to make an informed decision we need to be aware - uninformed decisions usually lead to ineffective outcomes" (18-20 year old student)

"Education is the key to breaking the cycles of political injustices!" (21-25 year old full-time worker)

INFORMED AND EMPOWERED ENGAGEMENT

The thoughts shared by rangatahi in this project show that an increase in relevant education about the electoral system would increase their sense of being informed and confident to participate in electoral activities, such as the upcoming referendum on the electoral system.



As also highlighted by rangatahi, however, one aspect they're interested in is how the different electoral systems affect Māori and Māori representation. A lack of satisfaction with the current arrangements, and the view that they breach the Treaty promise of tino rangatiratanga, has led to non-participation by Māori in the past.¹² Challenges for Māori to have a say politically therefore might be a problem if electoral education is meant to increase their involvement in electoral activities.

Information aimed at increasing rangatahi confidence to participate might therefore not only look at what systems are currently in place and/or available, but future possibilities. This includes arrangements for greater Māori representation. To develop effective electoral education programmes for rangatahi Māori, the following blocks of knowledge might therefore be a good start:

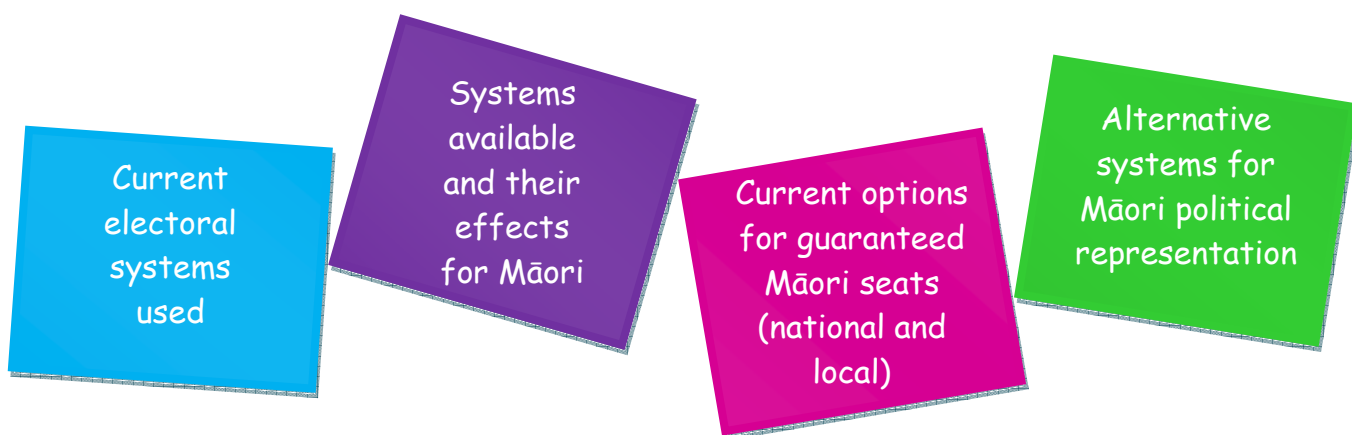


Figure 1: Blocks of Knowledge - Electoral Education for Rangatahi Māori

Conclusion

That rangatahi can get involved in electoral activities with knowledge and confidence is important to ensuring they enjoy citizenship equal to that of others. This is both important under the Treaty of Waitangi and making sure our nation's electoral systems are legit. That rangatahi in this project do not feel confident about getting involved in the upcoming referendum is therefore a problem. The limitations highlighted by rangatahi with the education they currently receive, and the suggestions they have made about (1) what they could be learning, like how the system works, how their votes count, and the effects for Māori, and (2) how they could be learning it, like more information in schools, in the media, and using internet-based technologies, is a clear way forward for improving electoral education in Aotearoa.

It should not be taken for granted, however, that education about what electoral systems are currently on offer will alone increase rangatahi involvement. There are issues which make their participation complex, such as the historical and contemporary challenges Māori face in political matters, such as representation.



Ensuring that rangatahi Māori can exercise their right to participate if they do wish to, however, in a way that's informed and in which they can feel confident about their decisions, is important. The different points raised by rangatahi in this project should be noted by educators, and those responsible for the development of electoral education, as a means by which, now and in the future, this can be achieved.

Description of Electoral System Options for the 2011 Referendum

First Past the Post (FPP)

Voters have one vote. That vote is for who they want to see represent their electorate (their region). Each electorate is allowed one Member of Parliament (MP). The person elected is the candidate who won the largest amount of votes in their electorate (what's called a 'simple majority': for example, 40% of the votes, as opposed to Candidate Two who may have won 30% and Candidate Three who may have won 25%). In this system, there is no such thing as a list MP, only electorate MPs.

Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)

Voters have two votes. One vote is for the candidate who they would like to see represent their electorate, and the other for the political party they wish to see in parliament. Each electorate can vote in one MP. This person is elected using the 'simple majority' rule. The party vote is then where each person gets to vote for one political party nationwide. From this vote, after each party takes their electorate seats, they get a share of the extra left-over seats in parliament based on how many party votes they've won. These extra seats are called 'list seats'. To be in parliament, a party must have (a) won at least one electorate seat, or (b) won at least 5% of the party votes overall.

Preferential Vote (PV)

Voters have one type of vote - an electorate vote. There are no list MPs. Each electorate instead chooses one MP. The winning electorate candidate however must have over 50% of all votes (what's called an 'absolute majority'). To help get a candidate who has the majority vote, candidates are ranked by voters in order of preference - 1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice and so on. If no candidates pass the 50% mark, the votes for the candidates with the lowest number of 1st choice votes are given to those voters' 2nd choice candidates. This continues until a candidate gets over 50%.

Single Transferable Vote (STV)

Voters have one type of vote - an electorate vote. There are no list MPs. Each electorate however gets to elect a number of MPs (for example, five). The number of electorates overall is therefore smaller (for example, 24). The winning candidates must reach a minimum number of votes, which is determined by a formula (for example, for five MPs each one must win at least 17% of the votes in their electorate). Candidates are ranked by voters in order of preference - 1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice, and so on. Candidates who get more than the minimum number of 1st choice votes get elected automatically. If there are spaces still to fill, the extra votes that the 1st choice candidate doesn't need to win (called 'surplus votes') are given to the 2nd choice candidate. If there are still spaces after that, then all of the last-choice candidate votes are taken and given to the 2nd choice candidate also. This continues with 3rd choice, and so forth, until all available electorate seat spaces are filled.

Supplementary Member (SM)

In this system, there are electorate MPs and list MPs, and each voter gets either one or two votes (depending on whether a one-vote or two-vote system is being used). There are more electorates (for example, 90) and less list seats (for example, 30). Electorate MPs are elected based on FPP (simple majority). List seats are then given out according to either which party's candidates got the most electorate votes nationally (the one-vote system) or through the number of votes won by each party through the separate party vote (the two-vote system).

Endnotes

- ¹ Kia ora! My name's Ronnie (Veronica) and I'm a lecturer at Te Pūtahi a Toi, the School of Māori Studies at Massey University in Palmerston North (NZ). If you have any questions about this research, political participation or education, please contact me on V.M.Tawhai@massey.ac.nz
- ² A big shout out goes to: two rangatahi, Kory-Dean Wirihana and Kemp Reweti, for their feedback on the research design and report; to Associate Professor Christine Cheyne and Associate Professor Richard Shaw for their input, and; to the mean Māori rangatahi who participated. Nei ra te mihi! ☺
- ³ Key, J. (2008). *Speech from the Throne 9 December, 2008*. Retrieved January 19, 2009, from <http://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/speech+throne+0>.
- ⁴ Owen, A. L., Videras, J., & Willemsen, C. (2008). Democracy, Participation, and Life Satisfaction. *Social Science Quarterly*, 89(4), 987-1005; Stutzer & Frey, 2006. Stutzer, A., & Frey, B. F. (2006). Political participation and procedural utility: An empirical study. *European Journal of Political Research*, 45(3), 391-418.
- ⁵ O'Neill, B. (2007). *Indifferent or Just Different? The Political and Civic Engagement of Young People in Canada*. Ottawa, Canada: Canadian Policy Research Networks; O'Toole, T., Lister, M., Marsh, D., Jones, S., & McDonagh, A. (2003). Tuning out or left out? Participation and non-participation among young people. *Contemporary Politics*, 9(1), 45-61.
- ⁶ See, for example, Alfred, T., Pitawanakwat, B., & Price, J. (2007). *The Meaning of Political Participation for Indigenous Youth*. Ottawa, Canada: Canadian Policy Research Networks.
- ⁷ UMR Research Ltd. (2006). *Maori Electoral Engagement - A Review of Existing Data*. Wellington: Electoral Commission.
- ⁸ For example, to learn te reo Māori over the net, see: <http://www.koreromaori.co.nz/>, <http://www.maorilanguage.net>, and <http://www.tewhanake.maori.nz/>.
- ⁹ See Cheyne, C. M., & Tawhai, V. M. H. (2007). *He Wharemoa Te Rakau, Ka Mahue; Maori Engagement with Local Government: Knowledge, experiences, and recommendations*. Palmerston North, New Zealand: Massey University.
- ¹⁰ UMR Research Ltd. (2007). *Understanding MMP - Additional Demographic Tables*. Wellington: Electoral Commission.
- ¹¹ For example, see Iyengar, S., & Jackman, S. (2003, November). *Technology and Politics: Incentives for Youth Participation*. Address at The International Conference on Civic Education Research, New Orleans, Los Angeles, USA; Bennett, W. L., & Xenos, M. (2004). *Young Voters and the Web of Politics: Pathways to Participation in the Youth Engagement and Electoral Campaign Web Spheres*. College Park, Maryland, USA: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, University of Maryland.
- ¹² For example, the boycott by the National Māori Congress of the 1992 Referendum on the Electoral System to instead campaign for a Māori parliament. See Atkinson, N. (2003). *Adventures in Democracy: A History of the Vote in New Zealand*. Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago Press.