

Public Perceptions of the New Zealand Parliament

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How do New Zealanders perceive their Parliament? Sadly, but not surprisingly, the general perception is poor. Recently a television opinion poll found that a majority of New Zealanders think New Zealand would be better off if governed by a panel of experts than by a cabinet responsible to Parliament. This echoes a similar result from the 1996 New Zealand Election Study.ⁱ Shortly after the 1996 election only a quarter of New Zealanders did not believe (and over 40% did believe) that "a few strong leaders would make this country better than all the laws and talk."

Perhaps the most concrete evidence of New Zealanders poor perception of Parliament comes from the apparently overwhelming support for reducing the number of MPs from 120 to 99. Following the successful circulation of a petition to which a quarter of million New Zealanders were prepared to sign up, the government announced a citizens initiated referendum on the issue will be conducted in conjunction with the upcoming election. So widespread is the belief that the referendum will be successful that there is very little in the way of an organised campaign against it. In New Zealand, unlike Australia there is no provision for publicly funded yes and no campaigns as a matter of course on referenda. Recently Professors Boston and McLeay have started to campaign against the referendum but most observers are certain this will be in vain.

This paper uses survey data to examine the perception New Zealanders have of the New Zealand Parliament and New Zealand Parliamentarians. After showing that the perception is clearly negative, it then seeks to identify possible reasons for this poor perception. Finally it suggests some measures to address this poor perception.

Measures of Public Perception of Parliament.

Given the current debate about the size of the House, the most obvious starting point for a discussion of the public perception of the New Zealand Parliament is to look at public support for reducing the size of the chamber. The New Zealand Parliament had been gradually increasing in size over time. The last Parliament elected under the single-member plurality electoral system (often referred to as "First-Past-the-Post" or FPP) contained 99 members. Given population increases it is clear that Parliament would have continued to grow (Boston and McLeay 1999: 6). The Royal Commission into the Electoral System which had recommended the change to MMP also recommended a significant increase in the size of the House to (at least) 120 MPs. This was not only to provide for greater proportionality but also as the Commission found that the New Zealand Parliament was understaffed in terms of MPs. Nowhere is this more evident than with the select committees where much of the most important parliamentary work occurs. With 120 MPs it is possible to have each of the 12 standing select committees with eight MPs, most of whom only serve on the one committee (Boston and McLeay 1999:5). It also makes it possible to ensure a fair degree of proportionality among parties. This recommendation was one that was popular with the electorate. It is important to note that the Royal Commission felt that the size of Parliament should increase regardless of whether the electoral system changed. Unfortunately when the 1993 referendum on the electoral system was held MMP and an increase in Parliament were explicitly linked in the public's mind. Rather than being asked whether they supported electoral system change alone they were asked if they agreed to electoral system change *and* an increased house or the status quo. Indeed, the anti-MMP campaign felt that this was a major campaigning advantage running advertising with the slogan "MMP = More Members of Parliament." Such was the level of disenchantment with politics that a majority still voted for MMP despite the lack of a majority in favour of increasing the size of the House. In 1990 the NZES found only 12% of voters supported the idea of increasing the size of Parliament to 120, while nearly 70% were opposed to the idea. While support for the idea had increased by 1993 with 17% of voters in favour and only 57% opposed, that same survey saw 40% of respondents (or 58% of those who had a firm opinion on the issue) support reducing the size of Parliament to 80. The 1996 survey saw 57% of respondents or 84% of those who expressed a view either way on the issue, supporting the idea of reducing the house to 80 MPs.

Some idea of why New Zealanders are so ready to support the reduction in the size of the House can be seen when we examine their responses to questions on the nature of MPs. Less than a fifth of respondents to the 1996 NZES believed MPs know what people think, while more than half believed that MPs do not care about people like them. In the same vein half the respondents believed that MPs were out of touch with ordinary New Zealanders. This had increased to over three-quarters by the 1998 NZES Mid-Term Survey.

Table 1 Perceptions of MPs

	1993		1996		1998	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
MPs out of touch?	61%	19%	50%	22%	76%	19%
MPs don't care what people think?	67%	17%	57%	21%	N/A	

According to Richard Fennoⁱⁱ 'Americans love their Congressmen but hate Congress'. This pattern seems to be repeated in New Zealand. While 20% of voters in 1993 disapproved of their local MP, almost twice as many (36%) approved. By 1996 this gap had widened with 15%

disapproving and 39% approving. New Zealanders seem to be reasonably well informed about their local MP. In 1996 well over half the respondents knew their incumbent MPs name and nearly two-thirds could identify their party. This was down on 1993 when just under two-thirds of voters correctly identified their local MP. However in both years less than 15% had personally met their local MP or knew of any contact between members of their family and their local MP or his or her office. Of those who did have contact with MPs 70% (1993 and 1996) were either somewhat or very satisfied with the response.

Table 2 Public Contact with MPs

	1993	1996
Read about MP	71%	74%
Received Mail from MP	68%	66%
Heard MP on radio	32%	
Saw MP on TV	28%	40%
Attended meeting with MP	9.0%	11%
None of the above	12%	

(Does not sum to 100% as respondents could fall into more than one of the first five categories)

Causes of the poor public perception.

So while voters are more likely to approve than disapprove of their local MP, and that small proportion of voters that actually contact and MP or his or her office are overwhelmingly satisfied with the experience, overall the impression New Zealanders have of their Parliamentarians is poor. There are a number of possible explanations for this. For anyone who is familiar with modern New Zealand politics there is a blindingly obvious explanation: the past 15 years have seen a large degree of voter disenchantment with the political process. Voters are less trusting of the major political parties and politicians generally. Basically New Zealand voters have been particularly grumpyⁱⁱⁱ. For example, in 1996, only a quarter of New Zealanders thought that political parties cared what people think. A third of all voters believed there was corruption in New Zealand politics with a similar number not knowing whether there was corruption or not. Over half the electorate believed that people like themselves had no say in their government and similar proportion believed the government was “largely run by a few big interests”. Less than a third of New Zealanders were able to agree that “you can trust the government to do what is right most of the time.” These figures provide a brief overview of what was a basically very disgruntled electorate. So perhaps the disaffection with Parliamentarians is just a function of this more widespread disenchantment with New Zealand politics in general?

As Table 3 (below) indicates, while New Zealand voters are still reasonably unhappy, the level of unhappiness has not remained constant through-out the decade. In 1996 New Zealanders were notably less disaffected than they were at the start of the decade. By 1998 the more restricted 1998 mid-term survey showed that voter unhappiness had increased. However, it is important to note that while voters were overall less content in 1993 than in 1996 the support for reducing the size of the House increased over this same interval.

Table 3 Public Dissatisfaction

	1990	1993	1996	1998
Reduce size of Parliament?	N/A (70% no to increasing house)	40%	57%	N/A
NZ going in wrong direction?	41%	27%	30%	N/A
Household financial position worse?	61%	41%	34%	N/A
Economic position of country worse	84%	23%	23%	N/A
Economic position worse in 12 months?	40%	14%	16%	N/A
People like me have no say in government	N/A	63%	57%	N/A
Government dominated by a few big interests	N/A	60%	54%	N/A
The government can <i>not</i> be trusted to do the right thing most of the time	N/A	45%	42%	68%
Trust <i>both</i> Labour and National		3.3%	11%	N/A
Dissatisfied with democracy in NZ	N/A	N/A	31%	55%
Political parties don't care about people	N/A	N/A	37%	N/A
Economy in bad state	N/A	N/A	11%	67%
Corruption in NZ politics	N/A	N/A	32%	N/A

N/A question not asked in that year's survey.

Now there are a number of explanations for this. Perhaps the result can be explained by sampling error, though the large size of the two surveys tends to mitigate against this. More likely New Zealanders who supported MMP at the 1993 election but were negatively predisposed to increasing the size of Parliament were more prepared to respond in a manner that was congruent with their vote for MMP. They had just cast a vote that, because it was in favour of electoral change had to be in favour of increasing the size of the House, so perhaps the desire for consistency dampened support for reducing the size of the House. Maybe voters in 1996 were indicating their dissatisfaction with the "party-hopping" they had seen over the intervening three years. All of these explanations are plausible, and probably do go some way to explaining the result. This indicates the problem of bivariate analysis. One way to get a more complete picture of the relationship between general political and economic dissatisfaction and perceptions of Parliament and MPs is to use analytical techniques which allow us to test more directly the relationship between a voters response on one question to their response on others.

Indeed when we test the relationship between “grumpiness” and perceptions of MPs (using the 1996 data) we find that the more broadly dissatisfied a voter is the more likely they are to believe that Parliamentarians are out of touch with voters and that they do not care what voters think. Running contrary to this, though, is a finding that the less grumpy a voter is the more likely they are to think that MPs do not know what ordinary people think. These conflicting results tend to suggest a more complicated picture than we might have expected. This is confirmed when we seek to explain the desire to reduce the size of Parliament in terms of “grumpiness”. Here the results are very weak. All the “grumpiness” factors discussed above do have a significant effect (at 0.005) on the likelihood of voters to support the reduction of the size of the House. However the predictive power of a model based on these factors is very low. Even if we know a voter's responses to all these questions there is only a 6% likelihood of correctly predicting whether they support the reduction of the House to 80 MPs. In fact, even this figure overstates the influence of the variables. Although all the variables used have a significant influence on the voter's opinions about reducing the number of MPs, the influence is not always in the way we would expect. For example, voters who believe things in general are going the right way, are *more* likely to support the reduction in number of MPs as are those who believe the economy is in a good state and those who believe the government can be trusted most of the time.

Table 4 Relationship between Grumpiness and Support for Reducing Number of MPs.

Significant Variables	Beta	Significance
People have no say	0.143	0.000
Government run by big interests.	0.104	0.000
Dissatisfied with way democracy works	0.070	0.000
Things going wrong way	-0.054	0.002
Bad outlook for country's future	0.045	0.004
State of economy worse these days	-0.064	0.000
Things worse for country in last 12 months	0.049	0.003
Can't trust the government	-0.056	0.001
Political parties don't care what people think	0.050	0.003
R Square 0.060		

So it seems that voter disenchantment with Parliamentarians is a function of more than just general voter disgruntledness and negative voter perceptions of Parliament cannot be explained simply as a function of general unhappiness with the political system. So we need to look elsewhere to explain why voters are unhappy with Parliament and Parliamentarians. One plausible explanation is that voters are confused about the role and functions of the New Zealand Parliament and of their MPs.

In much of the discussion of the New Zealand Parliament there is what I would describe as a “floor focus”. There seems to be a belief that all that is important occurs on the floor of the House. Clearly this is not the case. In fact much of the most important business conducted in Parliament goes on in forums other than the debating chamber. New Zealand's media is especially focussing almost exclusively on what does on in the debating chamber. Indeed most coverage of the debating chamber focuses on question time and major set-piece debates. These are the times when the house is in its least deliberative mode. Certainly the New Zealand media fails to live up to the criteria set out by former Prime Minister Sir Geoffrey Palmer as necessary for it to be able to justify its claim to being rightly seen as the “fourth estate”^{iv} in its coverage of Parliament.

For most New Zealanders all the information they receive about Parliament comes from the mass media. While the media continue to focus on only the aspects of the parliamentary process that are least deliberative New Zealanders will continue to believe that these are the most important aspects of what goes on in Parliament. This promotes the view that MPs do not take their job seriously and also ensures that voters remain ignorant of the other aspects of the work of Parliament and their parliamentary representatives.

MPs have a very different perception of which elements of their role are most important. In 1996 the NZES surveyed candidates on the importance of various suggested roles of MPs. The two role functions that received the highest proportion of “very important” ratings were electoral clinics and select committee work. Speaking in Parliament was rated as the second least important of the 13 activities surveyed.

Table 5 Candidates’ perceptions of the most important elements of MPs work.

1996 All Candidates	Mean ^y
Electoral Clinics	1.38
Select Committee Work	1.39
Representing Electorate	1.45
Individual Help	1.56
Developing Policy	1.58
Regional Interests	1.65
Local Party Meetings	1.72
Supporting Leader	1.83
Voting with Party	1.83
Local Functions	1.84
Interest Group Work	1.92
Speaking in Parliament	1.95
Media Interviews	2.04

When the respondents are broken down by parliamentary experience the results are a little different. Those candidates who are or have been in Parliament place much greater emphasis on electorate work. For these candidates select committee work slides to fourth place, however the difference between the top four places is not great and a major gap follows to the next role. It is worth noting that those candidates who currently do or have previously served in Parliament are, on average, less likely to see speaking in Parliament as being very important than they are to view any of the other 12 roles in this way.

Table 6 Current and Former MPs' perceptions of the most important elements of MPs work.

Current or Former MP	Mean
Electoral Clinics	1.34
Individual Help	1.40
Representing Electorate	1.40
Select Committee Work	1.40
Developing Policy	1.60
Voting with Party	1.65
Local Party Meetings	1.74
Local Functions	1.77
Regional Interests	1.81
Interest Group Work	1.85
Media Interviews	1.91
Supporting Leader	1.92
Speaking in Parliament	1.95

Interestingly those candidates who were unsuccessful in 1996 and who had never previously served in Parliament were the most likely to see select committee work as the most important role function of MPs, slightly nudging out electorate clinics. Like their more successful colleagues, these candidates also saw most other roles as having an edge over speaking in Parliament.

Table 6 Unsuccessful Candidates' perceptions of the most important elements of MPs work.

Never MP	Mean
Select Committee Work	1.39
Electoral Clinics	1.39
Representing Electorate	1.47
Developing Policy	1.58
Regional Interests	1.60
Individual Help	1.61
Local Party Meetings	1.72
Supporting Leader	1.80
Local Functions	1.86
Voting with Party	1.90
Interest Group Work	1.94
Speaking in Parliament	1.94
Media Interviews	2.08

While much of the discussion of Parliament focuses on what goes on in the House, MPs and even candidates for election, see things very differently. MPs place great emphasis on their role in the community. When it comes to their parliamentary role, they clearly rank their select committee duties as more important than speaking in the House. This pattern was also identified in the 1993 NZES survey of candidates and MPs.

It is not true to say that the New Zealand media ignores the wider operations of Parliament completely. Every evening when Parliament is sitting there is a bulletin on National Radio just before 6:30 called "Today in Parliament" which gives an account of all the days parliamentary activities, including select committee work, and deliberations in the House on various stages of legislation. Each Sunday following a sitting week an extended version is compiled called "This week in Parliament". However, this does not reach a wide audience. Instead what most New Zealanders see in the coverage of Parliament is MPs grandstanding and point scoring in question time. Given that they do not get to see where the real work is going on it is little wonder that New Zealanders have little respect for Parliament. Unfortunately there are a number of impediments to overcoming this. First, no matter how worthy it might be, there is little chance of getting the media to cover those parts of the Parliamentary process that are relatively free of point-scoring and grandstanding. While it would be untrue to say that it is a forum in which views are regularly swayed and party positions change, most voters would probably be surprised to observe the manner of debate when the house moves to the committee of the whole house stage of a bill. There is nothing stopping the media covering this now but the issues that tend to be raised in a clause by clause examination of a bill are rarely particularly fascinating. The media could cover such debates but would anyone watch, listen to or read such coverage?

Even if we could assume that the media would cover and citizens would be interested in some of the more considered debates that occur, the question then arises – would the presence of the media change the nature of the processes. Currently select committee deliberations are closed to members of the public. With the public excluded the MPs here evidence from officials and debate the issues in a very different manner to the way they would in the House. This is not to say that they operate in a non-partisan way. On some issues they may, but MPs are political creatures. They are elected to Parliament to represent particular interests. Nevertheless the level of debate and the willingness to try to explain differing points of view marks a strong contrast to what is seen in the debating chamber. Committees conduct much of their work in public. There is a noticeable difference in the tenor of committee operation when the public and especially when the media is present. So while it might improve the perception of Parliament for voters to see their elected representatives acting in a more restrained manner, the very fact that the voters can see may very well change the way MPs operate. The reality is that the media know that their customers want to see controversy and conflict. MPs know that grandstanding and point-scoring lead to media coverage. Citizens as consumers of media see this and are disappointed with their MPs and this feeds their disenchantment with Parliament as an institution.

It is not only in the behaviour that they desire from MPs that voters send their elected representatives conflicting messages. It is also unclear whether New Zealanders believe Parliament should be a deliberative institution. A common complaint about Parliament is that those (few) MPs that visitors observe sitting in the chamber seem to be more interested in reading the paper or talking with their colleagues than listening to what other MPs have to say on the matter at hand. This has been exasperated recently with some procedural changes. Under its previous Standing Orders the New Zealand House of Representatives had a quorum of 15 members, inclusive of the Speaker (Standing Order 56). Now there is no quorum requirement, though a sitting is suspended if there is no minister in the House.

If we see Parliament as a primarily deliberative body then poor attendance and an obvious lack of attention in debates is a matter of great concern. On the other hand, there is also great concern in New Zealand over the apparent willingness of successive governments since (at least) 1984 to act in a manner contrary to, at the very least, their implicit promises to the electorate. Nearly three-quarters of respondents to the 1996 NZES agreed “parties ought to make specific promises and keep all those promises when they are in government.” Indeed it is often argued that the perception that the two major parties could not be trusted to keep their pre-election promises was a major factor in the change to the electoral system.^{vi} If MPs are members of a party that has made specific promises and the house is debating legislation introduced to give effect to those promises, why should they listen particularly closely to what others, especially those with competing political agendas, are saying? Either they are wrong, in which case they can be ignored, or they are right in which case to adopt their position would be to break an election promise. Of course in reality things are not this clear cut. However most MPs are members of political parties that collectively adopt particular positions on issues. We would hope that these positions are influenced by rigorous research within the party. Ideally we would assume that any MPs in a party served on relevant select committees and heard the evidence from interested parties, would be in a position to influence the details of the party position when the matter was discussed in caucus. For better or worse our system of government relies on MPs having settled opinions on most issues long before they are debated in the House.

Towards improved perceptions of Parliament

It would be interesting to have data on New Zealanders perceptions of Parliament over a much greater time frame. Perhaps New Zealanders have always felt negatively about the institution and its inhabitants. If this is the case, maybe we should not be too concerned. People like to complain about Parliament and MPs but this is not an indicator of real discontent. However, if we believe that Parliament as an institution has an important role to play and are interested in seeing this role maintained and protected against encroachments from the other arms of government a high level of disenchantment really is a matter of concern.

Clearly the media have a role in improving the way that New Zealanders perceive their Parliament. There are many ways in which journalists covering the operation of the New Zealand Parliament could improve the quality of their reporting. While this is true, it is also only part of the solution, the problem goes beyond the media. So long as citizens as consumers of media demand coverage of politics which focuses on conflict this is what the media will deliver. This is not to assert that the causal relationship between what the media offers its consumers and what these consumers demand runs in only one direction.^{vii} Fortunately that debate falls outside the scope of this paper. Whatever the case may be if we want to improve the way New Zealanders perceive Parliament it is not enough to simply leave responsibility with the media. Until voters are clear about what they want to see their MPs doing and what they believe the role of Parliament should be the poor perception will continue. The only way the perception of Parliament can improve is if New Zealanders understanding of the role of MPs and the way their system of government works improves.

Unfortunately it is not clear how to go about doing this. Certainly there is a need for a concerted effort to educate New Zealanders about some of the details of their system of government. New Zealand has a uniquely influential committee system. One of the most unusual features of the system is the provision for a level of public participation as a matter of course. While it will be difficult to change New Zealanders attitudes towards Parliament through education alone, this would be an obvious starting point.

Of course the politicians themselves need to accept some responsibility for the current perception. Not just because foolish behavior on the part of a number has reflected badly on the institution and not just because too many are prepared to court media attention at any price. MPs, as the key participants in the process, need to do more to explain why Parliament works the way it does.

- i. The "New Zealand Election Study" (NZES) data is derived from the datasets generated by the nationwide, post-election voter and candidate surveys associated with the New Zealand Electoral Studies 1990-1999 Programme, and funded by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. I would like to thank the principal researcher, Jack Vowles, Department of Political Science and Public Policy, University of Waikato for access to the data.
- ii. R. Fenno, *Home style : House Members in their districts*, Little, Brown, Boston, 1978.
- iii. See e.g. M. Ganley "Who Voted for New Zealand First?" Paper Presented to the NZPSA Annual Conference, Waikato University 6 July 1997; S. Banducci and J. Karp. "Foundations of Trust and Responsiveness in the New Zealand Electorate." Presented to the NZPSA Annual Conference, Waikato University 6 July 1997; J. Karp and S. Banducci. 'Voter Satisfaction After Electoral System Change' in J. Vowles, P. Aimer, J. Karp and S. Banducci, (eds.) *Voters' Victory?* Auckland UP, Auckland, 1998.
- iv. G. Palmer, *New Zealand's Constitution in Crisis*, AUP, Auckland, 1992.
- v. 1 = very important, 2 = fairly important, 3 = not very important, 4 = not at all important.
- vi. B. Gustafson, 'Regeneration, Rejection or Realignment: New Zealand Political Parties in the 1990s' in G. Hawke (ed.) *Changing Politics? The Electoral Referendum of 1993* Institute of Policy Studies, Wellington, 1993; P. Temple, *Making your vote count twice: referendum '93: MMP vs FPP*, McIndoe, Dunedin, 1993, p.11; R. Mulgan, *Politics in New Zealand*, AUP, Auckland, 1997, pp.64-65.
- vii. See for example N. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* Little, Brown, Boston, 1987.