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PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS MMP AND COALITION GOVERNMENT

Raymond Miller and Jack Vowles*

Against the background of continuing discussion about an electoral referendum in 2011, this article assesses whether public support for mixed member proportional (MMP) and coalition government has consolidated or declined. This article draws on New Zealand Election Study data to explore shifts in public opinion since the introduction of MMP in 1996. It considers trends in support across parties and measures opinion across major social variables and, in a second part, analyses public attitudes towards MMP by examining differences between long-term and short-term influences and the distinction between attitudes towards MMP and attitudes towards proportionality.

I INTRODUCTION

Public opinion played a pivotal role in New Zealand's decision to adopt mixed member proportional representation (MMP) and, by implication, multi-party government. Despite strong opposition from the country's political and business elites, the 1992 electoral referendum produced an overwhelming public sentiment for change (with 85 per cent voting in favour of change). It was followed in 1993 by a somewhat smaller yet decisive majority (54 per cent) voting for MMP over the former plurality system. Opinion in support of electoral reform was primarily focused on two major constitutional concerns. The first was the highly disproportionate nature of a first past the post (FPP) system in which a government could be elected (twice)[1] despite receiving fewer votes than the opposition and in which small parties with the support of up to one in five voters and special interests, including women and Māori, were significantly under-represented in the nation's

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1 In 1978 Labour received 40.4 per cent of the valid vote and 40 seats, whereas National received 39.8 per cent and 51 seats. Three years later, Labour won 39.0 per cent of the vote and 43 seats. National, with 38.8 per cent and 47 seats, was re-elected with a one seat majority in the 92 seat chamber.

Parliament. Given these disproportionate effects of FPP, it is hardly surprising that the public's confidence in Parliament declined from 33 per cent in 1975 to under 10 per cent in 1988.[2]

However, a second and more serious concern was the absence of an effective system of checks and balances. As Palmer and Palmer observed, "[t]he governing party and its Cabinet directly dominated two of the three branches of government – the executive and legislature – and could overrule the third – the judiciary".[3] In its overview of the main elements of a good voting system, the Royal Commission on the Electoral System conceded that plurality voting had done nothing to curb the powers of a "powerful executive".[4] Following a decade of radical free market reform, most of which was introduced without public scrutiny or consultation, by the early 1990s "effective government" had become something of an aphorism for a range of desirable political goals, including legitimacy, transparency, responsiveness and restraint.

The formation in protest of a number of breakaway parties simply heightened the level of public concern. Not only did these new parties further skew the distribution of parliamentary seats, but they also drew public attention to the growing incidence of wasted votes. More profoundly, the advent of new parties raised questions about the democratic credentials of a political system in which successive governments were being elected with a diminishing minority of the overall vote (in 1981, for example, the National Party was elected with 38.8 per cent of the valid vote). While the main target of public criticism remained the executive, a climate of opinion had developed "that in its cynicism [had] grown less supportive and less tolerant of established modes of representative politics".[5]

With the prospect of another electoral referendum in 2011, it is timely to assess whether public support for MMP and coalition government has consolidated or declined. This article draws on New Zealand Election Study data to explore any shifts in public opinion since MMP was first introduced in 1996. Critics of MMP have long argued that coalitions produce unstable and ineffectual government. Given the National Party's lengthy periods in government under the former plurality system, it might reasonably be expected that opposition to MMP would be strongest among those on the centre-right of the political spectrum, especially following the collapse of the National–New Zealand First Government in 1998 and the election of the Labour Party in 1999 and its re-election on two subsequent occasions. This was certainly implicit in the National Party's repeated call, dating

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2 Raymond Miller and Helena Catt *Season of Discontent: By-Elections and the Bolger Government* (Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 1993) 31.

3 Geoffrey Palmer and Matthew Palmer *Bridled Power: New Zealand Government under MMP* (3 ed, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1997) 9.

4 The Royal Commission "Report of the Royal Commission on the Electoral System: Towards a Better Democracy" (Government Printer, Wellington, 1986) para 2.56 (also cited as [1986-87] IX AJHR 1986 H3).

5 Jack Vowles and others *Towards Consensus? The 1993 Election in New Zealand and the Transition to Proportional Representation* (Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1995) 194.

back to the 1990s, for a referendum on the future of the electoral system. But how might National voters have felt about multi-party government in the aftermath of the 2008 election, when their leader was signing up to a series of power sharing agreements with ACT, the Māori Party and United Future? And did the prospect of a centre-right government that included their erstwhile ally, United Future, as well as the Māori Party, dampen Labour voters' enthusiasm for MMP and coalition government? As well as considering trends in support across parties, we measure opinion across three major social variables, specifically gender, ethnicity and age. By the time of the forthcoming referendum, for example, no voters under 34 years of age (some 30 per cent of the voting population) will have experience of an alternative voting system. Hence we would expect that the young and early middle-aged will express a preference for the status quo in disproportionate numbers.

The second part of this article takes the analysis of public attitudes towards MMP a step further by examining two sets of distinctions: first, the differences between long-term and short-term influences; and secondly, the distinction between attitudes towards MMP and attitudes towards proportionality, the latter of which of course is the major principle underlying MMP. Given that many voters fail to fully appreciate the proportional effects of MMP, this article concludes by recommending the implementation of a comprehensive public information programme on the likely effects of the various alternative electoral systems well in advance of the proposed 2011 referendum.

II PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS MMP

As might be expected, much of the early support for MMP came from the smaller parties, as well as Māori, women and others with interests that were likely to benefit from a more proportional and representative Parliament. While two former Labour Prime Ministers, David Lange and Mike Moore, remained resolute in their opposition to MMP, Helen Clark, Moore's successor as party leader, was a late convert to reform, although only after MMP had been adopted. Labour supporters tended to polarise on the issue, with some expressing optimism about the prospects of a centre-left coalition government, while others felt affronted by the Alliance's popularity with voters[6] and hardline position with respect to a rapprochement with Labour.

Where early opposition to MMP was strongest, however, was on the centre-right, especially within the National Party, but also within ACT. The high level of support for FPP among National Party politicians and their supporters is understandable, given National's track record of success

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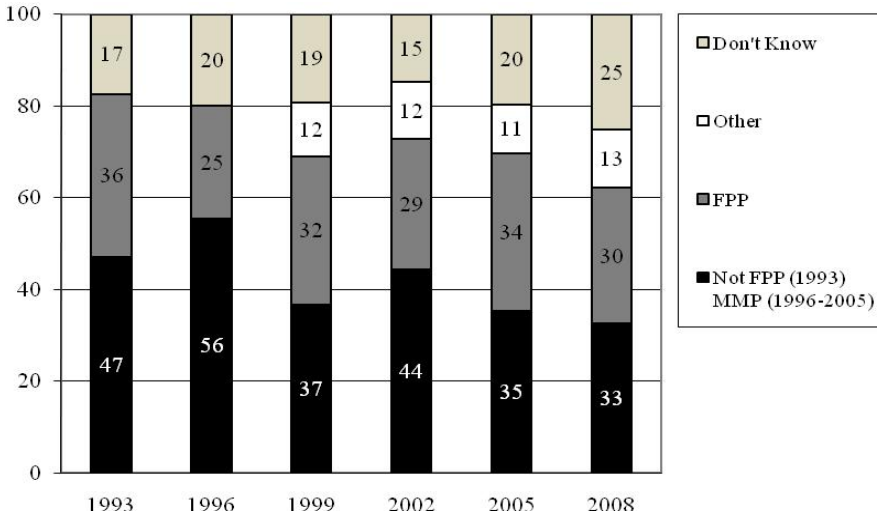
6 In her valedictory speech, Helen Clark noted that, "I became Leader of the Opposition at the very point that the old electoral order began to crumble, and smaller parties had a chance of finding a niche in the political spectrum. Labour lost support to the Alliance and to New Zealand First in particular. The nadir came with a Colmar Brunton poll in the mid 1990s which put Labour on fourteen per cent and me on two per cent as preferred Prime Minister. It doesn't get much worse than that…" Rt Hon Helen Clark "Valedictory Speech" (Wellington, 18 April 2009).

under FPP (it had been in government some 75 per cent of the time over the previous half century). While it made little sense for a small party to oppose a system that allocated seats in proportion to a party's share of the vote, several of ACT's leading figures, including its one-time organiser Brian Nicolle, had been active in the anti-MMP campaign and were ideologically committed to strong and decisive single-party government.

Figure 1 Preferred electoral system, 1993-2009



Notes: 1993 and 1996: "Other" electoral systems not listed as response options. "Don't Know" includes "Did Not Vote" responses.
1999-2008: Responses to "If there had been a referendum on the electoral system, how would you have voted?'. "Other" consistently showed strongest alternative preference for single transferable voting (STV).

Critics of MMP base their opposition on alleged weaknesses in the rules of MMP and problems they believe are systemic to its probable outcome, that of (minority) coalition government. With six parties winning seats in the first MMP Parliament, opponents argued that the 5 per cent threshold and one-seat constituency threshold were unrealistically low and therefore likely to place effective political power in the hands of small parties and even, in extreme cases, micro-parties. Other criticisms included the decision to increase the size of Parliament from 99 to 120 members[7] – a criticism based mainly on the grounds of inefficiency and cost – and the undemocratic nature of the party list system. According to this latter argument, list members of Parliament are unelected,

7 A citizens initiated referendum calling for a reduction in the size of Parliament from 120 to 99 members was passed in 1999 with the support of 81.5 per cent of all voters (with a voter turnout of 82.8 per cent). It was a non-binding referendum and it was not implemented.

having been picked by party "bosses" to serve the interests of the party rather than the voting public. Because they lack a base of electoral support, they are frequently dismissed as self-serving, "rootless" and "second-class".[8] It is further argued that the decision to have closed lists is a device designed to strengthen the hands of the party elite with respect to voters. Had the public been given open lists, then it at least could have reordered the rankings, thereby securing some limited influence over the election process.[9]

A recurring theme in the debate over coalition government concerns the role played by small parties, both during the potentially prolonged coalition negotiations process but also within the executive decision-making process. Notwithstanding any concerns over the extent to which reforming governments exercised "unbridled" power in implementing unpopular change, including a number of decisions made during the period of free market reform in the 1980s and early 1990s, the suggestion that small parties might be the "tail wagging the dog" continues to provoke fears of undemocratic, indecisive and unstable government. To understand the basis for this concern, it must be remembered that the role of small parties under the former voting system was largely restricted to that of an agent of protest for voters wishing to punish the National and/or Labour Parties. Because they had little if any experience in Parliament, let alone in government, the motives and aptitudes of the small parties were almost completely untested. One question that was frequently asked was: Could small parties formed in opposition to the two major parties set aside their differences in the national interest?

Critics of coalition government are also inclined to tap into the distrust of politicians and the desire for more open, accessible and responsive government that are at the heart of the public's support for MMP. They warn that elections do not result in the immediate transfer of power, as happened under FPP. Rather, coalition negotiations take place behind closed doors, with the exclusive right to choose being transferred from the voting public to the politicians. This may produce unexpected and indeed unpopular outcomes.

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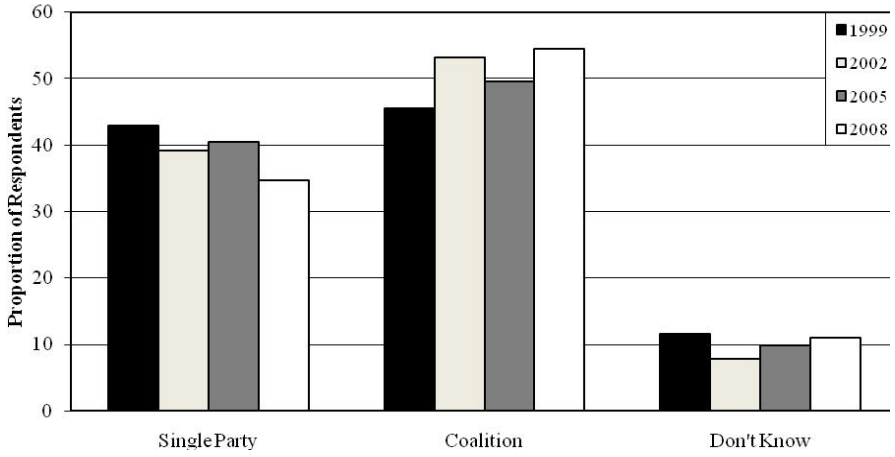
8 John Roughan "Fix Should Be Top of the List" (9 May 2009) *New Zealand Herald* Auckland A19.

9 When the open versus closed list option has been put to voters, open lists have been preferred by a significant majority (see for example Jack Vowles and others *Proportional Representation on Trial: the 1999 New Zealand General Election and the Fate of MMP* (Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2002) 182-184.

Figure 2 Preferred government composition, 1999-2008



As attitudes towards electoral systems show (see figure 1), support has been trending downwards since the introduction of MMP in 1996.[10] Expectations were high in 1996, with significant parliamentary representation having been gained by the small parties. When the survey was being administered the composition of the new government had yet to be determined (New Zealand First was in simultaneous discussions with both major parties, a process that continued for almost eight weeks). However, it was not long before the initial burst of enthusiasm for MMP began to be tested. In a decision that provoked accusations of dishonesty and betrayal, the New Zealand First leader broke a pre-election pledge not to go into coalition with the National Party. As well as becoming deputy Prime Minister and treasurer, Winston Peters secured from the National Party the promise that New Zealand First (which had 13 per cent of the vote, compared with National's 34 per cent) would receive eight out of 20 seats in Cabinet within two years. The decision by the Alliance not to engage in post-election discussions with Labour – as punishment for Labour's pre-election refusal to name the Alliance as its preferred coalition partner – effectively put paid to any chance of a centre-left government in 1996.[11]

As if these setbacks were not enough, subsequent difficulties both within New Zealand First and between New Zealand First and National had a seriously corrosive effect on public support for MMP. In the wake of its decision to form a government with National, New Zealand First's popular

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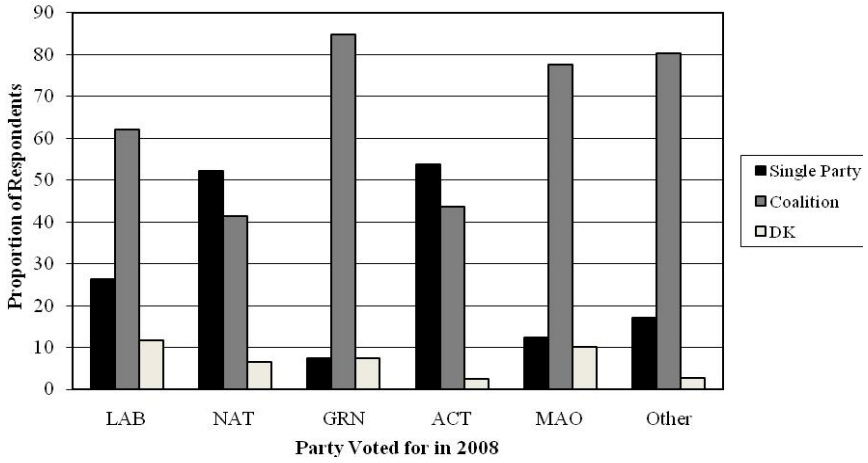
10 Amendment of the relevant question in 1999 to enable respondents to choose an alternative voting system (that is, neither MMP nor FPP) may help account for the high level of support for MMP in 1996.

11 Raymond Miller "Coalition Government: The People's Choice?" in Jack Vowles and others (eds) *Voters' Victory?: New Zealand's First Election under Proportional Representation* (Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1998) 120, 127.

support began to haemorrhage. Lack of executive experience and internal discipline made the relationship with the National Party increasingly problematic, especially when the junior coalition partner's unpopularity began to spread to National. Following complaints that the Prime Minister had failed to keep its renegade junior partner in check, Jim Bolger was replaced by Jenny Shipley. In August 1998, Winston Peters stormed out of Cabinet over its decision to sell its shares in Wellington Airport. Shipley's dismissal of Peters as a minister resulted in the collapse of the coalition and an irreparable split within New Zealand First, with several ministers and members of parliament (MPs) remaining loyal to the government. Given these circumstances, Levine and Roberts were quite correct in claiming that, had a follow-up electoral referendum been held during the period of 1996 to 1999, MMP would have been defeated.[12] This is largely confirmed by the findings in figure 1.

Figure 3 Preferred government composition by 2008 party vote

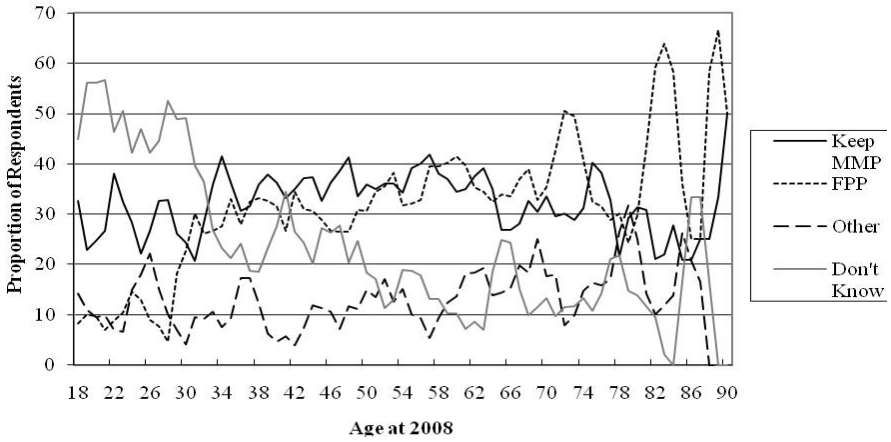


The rise in support for MMP in 2002, together with the slight drop in support for FPP, had much to do with the circumstances under which the election was called and the campaign fought. In announcing her decision to call an early election, Prime Minister Helen Clark asked voters for a mandate to govern alone, citing difficulties with her erstwhile coalition partner, the Alliance, as well as with the Green Party. A single-party Labour government, she reasoned, would be the best guarantee of stable and effective government. At the time of Clark's announcement, Labour was tracking above 50 per cent in the polls. Given the lack of support for both the National Party and the

12 Stephen Levine, Nigel S Roberts and Rob Salmond "A Wider View: MMP Ten Years On" in Stephen Levine and Nigel S Roberts (eds) *The Baubles of Office: The New Zealand General Election of 2005* (Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2007) 445, 446.

small parties, there was every prospect that her wish would be granted. However, the near-inevitability of a National defeat caused that party's voters to consider how they might exercise their party vote tactically with a view to frustrating Clark's plans. Even more odious for National voters was a Labour-led coalition involving the uncompromising Green Party (following the Green Party's decision to walk out of Parliament in protest at government policy with respect to genetically modified crops, it confirmed that it would not give support on confidence and supply to either a Labour-led or National-led government). During the course of the campaign, National's popularity continued to slide, with voters moving towards socially conservative parties that might oppose any radical plans being hatched by Labour. Following the election, the Labour–Progressive Government (with 54 seats) signed a support agreement with United Future (8 seats) and a cooperation agreement with the Green Party. The moderate nature of the new administration doubtless contributed to the rise in support in 2002 for both MMP and coalition government (see figures 1 and 2).

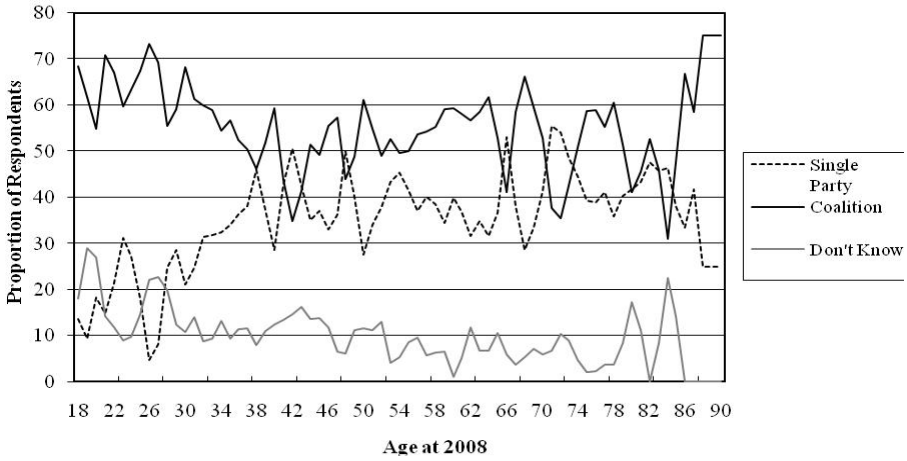
Figure 4 Electoral system preference as a function of age, 2008



Whereas the National Party leader Don Brash attempted to burn off support for the small parties, including ACT, in his vote maximisation strategy of 2005, his successor John Key was acutely aware that inter-party dialogue was an important prerequisite to government formation under MMP. As well as forging links with ACT, long before the 2008 election Key began to sow the seeds of a post-election arrangement with the Māori Party. While the Māori Party's ideological ally appeared to be Labour, the foreshore and seabed legislation was a significant obstacle to any agreement between the two parties, certainly in 2008. As well as providing the National Party with a counterweight to the libertarian pressures likely to be exerted by ACT, an agreement with the Māori Party would compensate National for decades of failure in the Māori seats. But Key was also attracted by the prospect of helping the Māori Party to increase its support among traditional Labour

voters. The sheer audacity with which he constructed his new government helped lift support for coalition government among National voters – up from 35 per cent in 2005 to 41 per cent in 2008. Even the formation of a centre-right National government with the support of ACT, together with a ministerial posting for the ACT leader Rodney Hide, proved insufficient to tilt opinion among National and ACT voters from their preferred option of a single-party government.

Figure 5 Preferred government composition by age



To get some sense of where attitudes to MMP and coalition government were coming from in 2008, we isolated the variables of age, gender and ethnicity. It is perhaps unsurprising to learn that attitudes towards MMP and coalition government are a product of age (see figures 4 and 5), with those in the 18-30 year age group showing a preference for MMP over FPP and a marked preference for coalitions over single-party government. The large number of "don't know" responses among the younger age group can largely be explained by the fact that electoral systems are highly technical. Without any direct knowledge or experience of voting under FPP, it is very difficult for this age group to be able to make comparisons. In contrast, the differences between coalition and single-party government are easier to understand. Clearly most young voters like what they have seen of coalition government, hence their strong support for it at all ages up to 40 years. Middle-aged and older voters are more favourably disposed to FPP than MMP; they prefer single-party to coalition government.

Table 1 Preferred government composition as a function of ethnicity and gender

	Single Party	Coalition	Don't Know
European	37	54	9
Māori	23	61	16
Pacifika	23	63	14
Asian	35	57	8
Male	41	51	8
Female	29	57	14

Finally, our hypothesis that women and Māori would be attracted to the more cooperative and consensual style of decision-making offered by coalitions is borne out by the data in table 1. Although there is a majority preference for coalitions in all gender and ethnic categories, support is strongest among women, Pacifika peoples and Māori. The strength of public support for coalition government across all social groups but especially young voters, women and ethnic minorities creates a significant obstacle to electoral change in 2011. It is clear from the data presented in this article that the opponents of MMP will have a daunting task in trying to convince voters that the weaknesses of MMP outweigh the benefits of coalition government.

III DISTINGUISHING MMP FROM PROPORTIONALITY

To understand public attitudes towards MMP it is useful to make two sets of distinctions: first, the differences between long-term and short-term influences; and secondly, the distinction between attitudes towards MMP and attitudes towards proportionality, the latter of which of course is the major principle underlying MMP. Proportionality is not understood as widely as many might hope or assume. Many people's attitudes towards MMP are not necessarily directly shaped by that principle, particularly in the short term. Support for proportionality also needs to be tested not just in the abstract, but as a trade-off. Many people express support for proportionality but some of those also prefer single-party majority governments to coalitions. The toughest and most meaningful questions to ask are therefore a trade-off, and have been asked by the New Zealand Election Study[13] since 1999. Question E7 asked: "If you have to choose, which of the following is more important to you?: One party has more than half the seats in Parliament, so it can easily govern on its own; or parties have about the same percentage of seats as their per cent of the party vote; or don't know". Question E3 asked: "If there had been a referendum held on the electoral system at the same time as the [2008] election, how would you have voted? To keep MMP; return to FPP; for an alternative, neither MMP nor FPP; don't know." (Those voting for an alternative were asked to provide it). The answers to these questions are set out in table 2 below.

13 New Zealand Election Study 1999 (accessible at www.nzes.org).

Table 2 Trade-off preferences as a percentage of MMP/FPP preference groups

Answer to question E7	Answer to question E3				
	Keep MMP	Prefer FPP	Prefer alternative system	Don't Know	All respondents
More than Half	22.9%	74.0%	50.0%	25.1%	42
Same percentage	69.7%	18.1%	43.9%	33.5%	42
Don't Know	7.5%	7.9%	6.1%	41.4%	16
Number responding	866	792	335	670	2609
Row %	**32.1%**	**29.3%**	**12.4%**	**24.8%**	

Table 2 indicates how support for MMP and opinion about the proportionality trade-off are related. All percentages except those for the bottom row (in bold) are by column. On proportionality, the distribution for "all" in the column furthest to the right indicates that in 2008 New Zealanders were evenly split. Reading the row percentages, MMP had the edge over FPP, but over a third of New Zealanders preferred neither or did not know. About a fifth in each of the MMP and FPP columns did not choose the proportionality/anti-proportionality option consistent with their MMP/FPP opinion, indicating some confusion. (18.1% of those who preferred FPP also wanted parties to have the same percentage of seats as their percentage of the party vote, while 22.9% of those who preferred MMP wanted a party that had more than half the seats in Parliament to be able to govern on its own.) The alternative group had an anti-proportional majority, but only by a six point margin. Of the MMP/FPP "don't know" responses, about 40 per cent continued not to know, but of the rest, more favoured proportionality.

For the short-term effects, the best time series analysis of support for MMP runs from 1997 to 2001, and is derived from UMR Insight polls that were taken monthly, although with some gaps.[14] This period tracks the National–New Zealand First coalition, its break up, the election of the Labour–Alliance coalition Government, and most of the first term of the Labour-led Government. This was a period of recovery in support of MMP after the negative public reaction to the first coalition government under the new system. In 1997, MMP support was tracking around 31 per cent, its apparent "base" level. By 2001, it had increased to about 38 per cent, which was much more competitive with support for the old FPP system. Two-thirds of the improved support could be explained by various aspects of government approval: poll support for the main government incumbent party (for every 5 per cent increase in that figure, support for MMP was higher by about 1 per cent) and, most of all, shifts in government composition. After taking account of shifts in government popularity both within and between the governments over the period, the demise of the

14 Referring back to figure 1, readers will note that it only gives data at three-year intervals and thus does not sufficiently reflect variation within the 1997-2001 period. In particular, it tracks the major decline in confidence in MMP in 1998 that the election-related data cannot take into account.

National–New Zealand First ill-fated government partnership moved MMP support up by about 1.5 per cent, but the main effect was the election of Labour and the Alliance, which caused a massive 7 per cent upward shift.[15]

Another short-term influence can be identified after the 2005 election, this time on the level of support for proportionality against a preference for single-party majority governments as estimated by the question displayed above. Opinions were equally split, with proportionality having a very slight edge.[16] As most will recall, this was a very close election, and Labour was only able to govern on the basis of arrangements that gave New Zealand First and United Future ministerial positions outside of Cabinet. This was an unusual arrangement, particularly with New Zealand First party leader Winston Peters becoming Minister of Foreign Affairs. There was much scepticism about whether such arrangements would work or survive, particularly given Peters' role in the failure of the first coalition government under MMP. In the post-election survey undertaken by the New Zealand Election Study, those who returned their questionnaires after the formation of the government were 8 per cent less likely to support proportionality than those who returned their questionnaires before it.[17]

These short-term concerns directly address one of the key criticisms of proportional electoral systems: that they may fail to deliver effective government. On the other hand, as experience of New Zealand governments under the old system confirmed, majority single-party governments can be too "effective"; so effective that they act in ways that offend majority public opinion and therefore sap faith in government accountability and its ability to represent voter preferences. Defenders of MMP argue that proportional representation provides a balance that prevents overbearing government without hobbling it excessively.[18]

These debates feed into longer-term attitudes and values that are rooted in political psychology. People of more liberal dispositions are comfortable with constraints on government powers, but those who are more socially conservative tend to value firm authority and strong leadership. Not surprisingly, those wanting authoritative government tend to be less keen on coalition governments and proportional representation.[19]

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15 Raymond Miller "Coalition Government: The Labour-Alliance Pact" in Vowles and others, above n 9, 114, 118.

16 Jack Vowles "The Genie and the Bottle: Is New Zealand's MMP System Here to Stay?" in Mark Francis and Jim Tully (eds) *In the Public Interest: Essays in Honour of Professor Keith Jackson* (Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2009) 105, 115.

17 Miller "Coalition Government: The Labour–Alliance Pact", above n 15, 118.

18 See for example Matthew Soberg Shugart and Martin P Wattenberg *Mixed Member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds?* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001).

19 James W Lamare and Jack Vowles "Party Interests, Public Opinion and Institutional Preferences: Electoral System Change in New Zealand" (1996) 31 Australian Journal of Political Science 321, 326-327.

Finally, one of the key variables identified by research into electoral system change has to be acknowledged: partisan interests. Normally, students of electoral systems focus on how those interests are constructed by party leaders, politicians and strategists because most electoral system decisions are made by those elites. But where electoral systems are partly decided by referendum, as in New Zealand, the attitudes and values of voters need to enter the equation. More generally, recent research goes beyond the analysis of partisan interests while continuing to recognise their role.[20]

Even in cases like New Zealand, of course, party elites still have a strong influence. They decide whether or not the matter is put to referendum and crucially, what form the question will take and what options are presented to voters. In 1992 and 1993 part of this agenda setting role had been shaped by the Royal Commission on the Electoral System, a forum relatively independent of party politics (although of course a decision to establish it had to be taken by a government in the first place) and its appointees were chosen by Labour, which was then in government. Nonetheless, the Royal Commission was largely untainted by partisanship and the quality and depth of its report meant it could not be ignored. Nonetheless, in 1992 the National Government sought to reopen many of the issues on which the Royal Commission had given clear recommendations. While in 1992 and 1993 only the Alliance took a clear position on MMP, the key members of other parties made their own individual positions clear. Most National Party figures were opposed to MMP. Most senior Labour MPs opposed MMP, but many newer MPs and activists strongly supported it.

Political psychology tells us that, when presented with complex choices on which they lack knowledge or information, voters will seek "cues" from sources they trust.[21] More often than not and where they identify with a particular political party, voters will take that party's position as their guide. This appears to be the case when New Zealand voters are presented with electoral system choices, particularly where partisans are concerned.

Data is available from the 2008 New Zealand Election Study which tests the shape of public opinion on both MMP and proportional representation and is drawn from an election at which a single party, National, only narrowly missed out on governing under a majority in its own right. The 2008 New Zealand Election Study was conducted by Jack Vowles (Universities of Exeter and Auckland), Raymond Miller, Jennifer Curtin and Ann Sullivan (University of Auckland) with the assistance of Jeffrey Karp (University of Exeter). It was funded by various sources within the

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20 See for example André Blais (ed) *To Keep or To Change First Past the Post? The Politics of Electoral Reform* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008).

21 Samuel L Popkin *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns* (1 ed, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991); Paul M Sniderman, Richard A Brody and Philip E Tetlock *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991). For discussion of the limits of these assumptions see James H Kuklinski and Paul J Quirk "Reconsidering the Rational Public: Cognition, Heuristics, and Mass Opinion" in Arthur Lupia, Mathew D McCubbins and Samuel L Popkin (eds) *Elements of Reason: Cognition, Choice, and the Bounds of Rationality* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001) 153.

University of Auckland, the New Zealand Electoral Commission, Auckland University of Technology and (for specific modules of questions) by the University of Houston and the New Zealand Treasury. It was conducted by mail and internet, although the majority of responses came by mail. Respondents were randomly selected from the electoral rolls, and therefore were representative of those New Zealanders eligible to vote in 2008. The sample included panels of respondents from the 2002 and 2005 elections, and over-sampled the Māori electorate and persons twenty-six years of age and younger. The response rate was approximately 40 per cent. The total sample size was 3042. The data has been weighted to correct for over-sampling, and by gender, age, vote and education to adjust for the most likely possible non-response biases. The weighted sample size was 2700, reflecting the size of the sample on the basis of non-over-sampled groups – that is, as if there had been no over-sampling.

This "near miss" was close enough to hitting the target, with a clear centre-right majority in the new House of Representatives and apparently stable relationships with the ACT and United Future parties and a more experimental arrangement with the Māori Party as a backstop. 2008 was National's most successful election under MMP, an experience that might, or might not, have an effect on its voters. Aside from partisan interests, we can test background demographic effects, notably age, for their effect on experience of MMP, political knowledge, liberal–authoritarian differences and trust and satisfaction with government. These latter variables, however, present a paradox. In general, support for MMP and proportionality has been associated with low trust and satisfaction, and a sense that "politicians don't listen". Under MMP, however, people have become a little happier about New Zealand governments.[22] This may or may not have anything to do with MMP. But if MMP has helped to reduce public dissatisfaction, it would be ironic if support for MMP should have declined as a result.

Table 3 displays findings from two logistic regression models, one against support for MMP over other electoral system choices and the other against support for proportional representation over majority single-party government. Differences between the two models illustrate the extent to which opinion about MMP differs from that about its main principle of proportional representation. The effects of each individual variable are best seen within the probability estimates, which measure the difference between people taking a maximum and a minimum position on the variable in question. Where findings are not statistically significant they can also be discounted. For example, age and gender have no effect on MMP opinion, but net of the effects of all other explanatory variables, women are 8 per cent more likely to favour proportionality than men and the oldest person is 34 per cent less likely to favour proportional representation than the youngest person in the sample.

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22 Jack Vowles and Peter Aimer "Political Leadership, Representation and Trust" in Jack Vowles and others (eds) *Voters' Veto: The 2002 Election in New Zealand and the Consolidation of Minority Government* (Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2004) 167, 174.

Table 3 Support for MMP and for the proportionality trade-off, 2008

	Support for MMP				Support for proportionality			
	B		SE	Prb	B		SE	prb
Female	-0.15		0.09	-3	0.31	**	0.09	8
Age	0.00		0.00	1	-0.02	*	0.00	-34
Values and attitudes								
Against strong leaders	0.14	**	0.05	12	0.16	**	0.05	15
Distrust government	-0.01		0.06	-1	0.13	*	0.06	13
MPs in touch	0.23	**	0.05	21	0.13	*	0.05	13
Dissatisfied democracy	-0.70	**	0.08	-41	-0.33	**	0.07	-24
Partisan (small parties = reference category)								
Vote Labour	-0.32		0.20	-6	-0.83	**	0.22	-20
Vote National Party	-0.49	*	0.19	-10	-1.54	**	0.20	-36
No vote	-0.74	**	0.14	-14	-1.01	**	0.16	-24
Strength ID small parties	1.10	*	0.23	24	0.07		0.25	2
Strength ID Labour vote	0.15		0.34	3	0.05		0.37	1
Strength ID National Party vote	-1.82	**	0.38	-29	-0.90	*	0.37	-22
Knowledge								
MMP not proportional	-0.26	*	0.06	-22	-0.08		0.05	-7
Constant	0.75	**	0.38		1.60	**	0.39	
% predicted	71.7				66.4			
Cox & Snell R Square	0.14				0.15			
Nagelkerke R Square	0.19				0.2			
N	2662				2211			

** significant at the 99 per cent level * significant at the 95 per cent level
Notes: See Appendix.

The level of like or dislike for strong leadership has similar effects in both models, but distrust of government influences proportional representation but not MMP opinion. A sense that MPs are "in touch" is associated with support for MMP and proportional representation, but is strongest for MMP. The effects of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with democracy vary similarly. Both these are based on more short-term impressions and are more likely to be associated with a current government. The variables for partisanship contain an interaction between voting and strength of identification with the parties in question. Small parties also act as the reference category, meaning that the effects for the large parties and non-voters are estimated against those for small party voters. The "Vote Labour" and "Vote National Party" variables estimate the effects for non-identifying voters in each camp against those for non-identifying small party voters. In general, the findings

bear out the effects of partisanship, but Labour voters were less opposed to MMP and proportional representation than National voters and strength of Labour partisanship had no effects. By contrast, National Party voters were much more strongly opposed to both MMP and proportional representation. Finally, the effects of political knowledge were strongest on MMP but were not significant on proportional representation. Enhanced understanding that MMP is proportional as compared to FPP also enhances its support. That said, support for and opposition to proportionality are now closely matched among New Zealanders.

Table 4 displays, down each column, the distributions of support for MMP and proportional representation across non-voters, National, Labour and small party voters. In fact, all groups of voters except those for National lean toward MMP and proportional representation, although small party voters are understandably the strongest. Even among National voters there is a significant minority of support for MMP and proportional representation. Compared to earlier data, this has not changed. But two other key variables have changed. Support for MMP and proportional representation has declined even among those who might be expected to support it, as has the small party vote that is at its core.[23]

Table 4 Support for MMP and proportionality by party vote, 2008

	Nonvote	Labour	National Party	Small Parties	All
PR					
More than half	33	36	62	23	42
Same percentage	39	48	28	66	42
Don't know	28	16	11	11	16
MMP					
Keep MMP	27	44	22	46	33
FPP	20	24	46	18	30
Prefer an alternative	10	8	16	17	13
Don't know	43	25	17	20	25

IV CONCLUSION

The impetus for electoral reform in the 1990s reflected a profound sense of voter disillusionment with the radical policies of successive Labour and National Party governments. While supporters of MMP were doubtless influenced by the promise of a fairer system of representation for small parties and special interests, notably women and Māori, they were also intent upon punishing the politicians of both major parties for broken promises, lack of accountability and a failure to consult. Rather

23 Vowles and others, above n 9.

than curbing the powers of the two big parties by way of constitutional reform with a written constitution and upper house as potential options, MMP provided voters with a less radical, though effective, alternative.

Unlike in the 1990s there appears to be no great mood for reform. Many middle-aged and older voters have expressed disappointment at the lack of a referendum as part of the MMP review process (the Electoral Act 1993 made provision for a parliamentary review of MMP, but not a follow-up referendum). The government's initiative is in part a response to this demand.

With the revival of the pro-MMP and anti-MMP lobby groups in preparation for the 2011 electoral referendum, voters can be assured of an intense debate. How much will they learn during the referendum process? And how much effort will the government make to inform voters of the likely effects of each of the alternative electoral systems appearing on the ballot? More knowledge about the proportional nature of MMP should enhance its support. It could be difficult to do this, however, if a far less proportional system is being misleadingly sold as a "semi-proportional" alternative. Young voters seem to like proportional representation, but seem less able to associate it with MMP, so the extent to which they receive and assimilate information will be important.

The stated preference of anti-MMP campaigners for the supplementary member system suggests that they now recognise the public has no appetite for a return to the FPP system. Along with the business elite and successive National Party leaders since Jim Bolger, they are likely to endorse a system that gives limited representation to the small parties whilst virtually ensuring a return to single-party majority government. The success of their campaign is likely to rest on the popularity of the National-led Government at the time of the 2011 election. A popular and successful government could find it hard to convince the public that it was inhibited in achieving its goals because of fundamental flaws in the nature of MMP and coalition government. On the other hand, its secure majority of centre-right parties may tempt it to act in ways that "smack of strong government". If such behaviour was not widely popular, New Zealanders could move back to MMP to restrain an arrogant government and turn once more towards the small parties as they did in the early to mid-1990s.

If the National Party's popularity drops in the period leading up to the next election, it will become increasingly vulnerable to the accusation that it is acting out of self-interest. As we know from the 1992 and 1993 electoral referendums, voters are quick to punish politicians who appear to be telling them what to do, especially if the outcome they are proposing will reduce the public's ability to scrutinise government action and place reasonable limits on its ability to exercise power. This presents the National Party with something of a paradox. If it wishes MMP to be replaced by a less proportional system, its best ploy would be to pick battles with its support parties and fail to provide effective government, which is not a strategy that is likely to appeal.

APPENDIX: NOTES FOR TABLE 3

The remaining questions were as follows:

Dependent variables:

(a) If there had been a referendum held on the electoral system at the same time as the 2008 election, how would you have voted? (Support for MMP = 1, otherwise 0).

(b) If you have to choose, which of the following is more important to you? "One party has more than half the seats in Parliament, so it can easily govern on its own", or "Parties have about the same percentage of seats as their per cent of the party vote"? (Support for proportionality = 0, support for single-party government = 0).

Independent variables:

(a) Thinking now of the party vote, which party did you vote for in the 2008 election? (Three "dummy" variables: Labour = 1; others = 0; National = 1; others = 0; nonvote = 1; others = 0. The reference category is small party vote, against which the effect of the other dummy variables are estimated).

(b) Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as CLOSE to any particular party? (A list of parties is then provided). Do you feel very close to this party, somewhat close, or not very close? ("Closeness" is estimated on a four-point scale, the bottom of which is 0, indicating no closeness to any party). Closeness to any party is entered into the model as a "main effect", and then multiplied by Labour and National Party votes to estimate the effects of closeness to these parties compared to other parties.

(c) On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in New Zealand? (A four-point scale, with dissatisfaction at the top, thus "dissatisfied with democracy").

(d) Agreement or disagreement with (five-point scale, with "strong disagreement" at the top, so the labels reflect this "reversal"):

- The party with the most votes is more likely to get the most seats under MMP than under first past the post (MMP not proportional);
- A few strong leaders could make this country better than all the laws and talk (against strong leaders);
- Most Members of Parliament are out of touch with the rest of the country (MPs in touch);
- You can trust the government to do what is right most of the time (distrust government).