

*Democracy in New Zealand*

Raymond Miller

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Reviewed by Patrick Barrett

Declining trust in politicians and falling rates of voter turnout, raise questions about the accuracy of the widely held perception that New Zealand is an exemplary democratic nation with high levels of public engagement and political party responsiveness. An informed response to such questions requires an understanding of how democracy operates in New Zealand, including knowledge of the structure of government, the system for electing representatives, the role of political parties, and the implications for collective decision-making. This book, by respected political commentator Raymond Miller, serves that purpose admirably; it is an up-to-date, accessible introduction to politics and government in New Zealand that will appeal to both a general audience as well as being particularly useful for undergraduates.

Raymond Miller, from the Politics Department at the University of Auckland, is well qualified to provide such an introduction. He has been the editor of the first five volumes of what has become a standard text in the teaching of politics in New Zealand, the Oxford University Press title *New Zealand Government and Politics*. This sole-authored book, which is very much a successor to Richard Mulgan's *Politics in New Zealand*, draws on contemporary political research and recent historical events. This includes coverage of the 2014 election and the prior campaign period during which revelations of the 'dirty politics' and the Kim Dotcom scandal surfaced. With reference to such events, it introduces the fundamental features of the New Zealand political system, with a particular focus on the operation of our democracy. It is a timely contribution, given the last edition of *Politics in New Zealand* was published in 2004, providing authoritative accounts of government and politics in New Zealand today, and it will serve as an important resource for students in political science, public policy and related subjects.

Despite the legacy of inherited political institutions from the Westminster system of government, Miller presents New Zealand's experience of democracy as being defined by its geographical remoteness, the small size of the population, and its relative youthfulness as a fully independent state. These factors, he maintains, contribute to a sense of intimacy and belonging that is evident in the close links between ordinary voters and political leaders in a way that is not possible in more populous states. He posits that these have contributed to a distinctive New Zealand version of democracy characterised by the complex interaction between the governing elite and citizens. After introducing this history, he outlines the institutional framework through which representative democracy is practised, with specific chapters on parliament, the MMP electoral system, and cabinet government. In addressing each of these topics, Miller draws on contemporary political studies scholarship, and notably the long-running New Zealand Election Study, updating previous accounts and presenting them in a compelling way to a contemporary audience.

As well as providing a foundation for understanding the role and function of the key institutions of government, Miller addresses ongoing areas of debate about how we organise the conduct of politics. These include questions relating to the nature of our constitution and whether we should remain a constitutional monarchy; the operation of parliament (including its ideal size) and the length of parliamentary terms (is three years too short?); the adequacy of checks and balances provided by parliament and whether MMP has fulfilled the promise of limiting the power of the government; the ongoing existence of specific Māori electorates; and so forth. In

dealing with these issues, Miller's approach is to systematically lay out the various arguments on either side of debates, and in so doing, assist readers in becoming more informed about the complexities involved.

The chapters on political leadership and Māori electoral politics are particular strengths of the book, and will prove to be engaging topics within the classroom. With regard to political leadership, Miller begins by acknowledging problems with single-actor narratives as explanations for government decision-making, but suggests they do have potential to enhance our understanding of contemporary developments in politics in New Zealand. This recognises the increasingly important role of prime ministers and party leaders as links between the public and the political system. Miller has written before on political leadership, and his chapter on this topic recognises the way politics in New Zealand now echoes the presidential politics of the United States, and particularly how our two most recent prime ministers, Helen Clark and John Key, have dominated the national political landscape. Their biographies, personal qualities and leadership styles are analysed, with Clark's measured pragmatism, underpinned by an astute appreciation of the motivations of voters, and Key's instinctive ability to connect with ordinary voters, both contributing to their effectiveness and impact. Miller also devotes attention to the understudied issue of political leadership as it relates to opposition and small party leaders. All of this is a useful platform on which to introduce students to the role and functions of prime ministers and other party leaders.

In a chapter on Māori electoral politics, he traces the history of Māori representation, from the 'token' provisions for Māori through the establishment of specific electorates in 1867, to the development of the electoral alliance between Māori and the Labour Party in the early 1930s, the emergence of the Mana Motuhake movement in the 1970s, the later breaking of Labour's hold over the Māori seats in the 1990s, through to the emergence of the Māori Party. Since the adoption of MMP, Māori voting has become much more conditional, with support at different times shifting between New Zealand First, the Māori Party and Labour. Miller explains the dynamics associated with this in an accessible and compelling way, and observes that this conditionality is likely to be an ongoing trend.

A book on New Zealand democracy should give a great deal of emphasis to the electoral system and how it works. The adoption of MMP in 1996, arguably the largest constitutional reform New Zealand has experienced, has had significant consequences for the conduct of politics in New Zealand. The introduction to this topic is clear, particularly as it outlines the most recent reviews of the system, and the proposals to reform the one-seat threshold and lower the five percent party vote threshold. These somewhat complex ideas are clearly explained and relevant to contemporary teaching environments.

What conclusions then, does Miller draw about the state of our democracy? To give some perspective on this question, in his final chapter he presents a number of theoretical perspectives by which we might assess the quality of democratic practice: pluralism, direct democracy and deliberative democracy. Each perspective casts the conduct of democracy in New Zealand in a different light and leads to different conclusions. While Miller is reassured somewhat by the level of public interest in politics and in empirical measures of public satisfaction with the practice of democracy, ultimately he concludes that government is conducted through complex interactions between citizen participation, and the actions of a governing elite which, in the end, continues to hold the upper hand.