

WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: DOES THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM MATTER?

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Abstract: *New Zealand's current electoral system, a mix of electorate and proportional representation, leads to two types of MP sitting together within the same legislative chamber, the House of Representatives. This study explores the views of women electorate and list MPs about their representational roles and responsibilities, focusing in particular on their attitudes towards the representation of women. The analysis is based on interviews conducted in April-May 2003 with 28 of 34 New Zealand women MPs, with at least one woman MP taking part from every party with women MPs elected at the 2002 election. The discussions with women MPs reveal a broad acceptance among the MPs of a responsibility to represent women, a commitment seemingly little influenced by whether MPs' mandates were derived from an electorate or a party list.*

Keywords: *Representation, women, electoral systems*

In New Zealand, 1993 to 1996 was a transitional period from an electoral standpoint; it was during these years that the country abandoned the first-past-the-post (FPP) electoral system that it had been using since the mid-19th century and replaced it with a mixed member proportional (MMP) system, somewhat upsetting what Lijphart has described as 'the purest example of the Westminster model of government.'¹ There were several reasons for this transition from the FPP to the MMP system, including the perception that FPP was not properly expressing the will of the people in terms of parliamentary representation and the desire to reduce the domination of the executive by returning some power to the legislature and to members of Parliament (MPs). One of the features of the MMP system is that it identifies two types of MPs, electorate members and list members, depending on how they were elected to the single chamber of the New Zealand Parliament, the House of Representatives. The former are elected through the FPP system; each electorate MP represents an electoral district. List members are elected on the basis of a national list proportional formula; the number of list MPs reflects the support received at the polls by their political party. The type of MMP adopted in New Zealand is compensatory, meaning that the seats designated for proportional representation (PR) are allocated among the parties on the basis of the number of votes received by each party nationally, with a view to correcting distortions engendered by the FPP system between the number of votes received by a political party and the number of MPs elected. Generally speaking, electorate and list MPs have the same constitutional status. Although they resemble one another in terms of socio-demographic features and their past political experience, list MPs have sometimes been regarded as 'second-class MPs'.²

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¹Arend Lijphart, 'The Demise of the Last Westminster System? Comments on the Report of the New Zealand's Royal Commission on the Electoral System', *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1987), p. 97.

²Leigh J. Ward, "'Second-Class MPs'? New Zealand's Adaptation to Mixed-Member Parliamentary Representation', *Political Science*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (1998), pp. 125-152.