Saint Patrick's Strengthening Democracy Project 2025

We have designed a project that will help new migrants to Aotearoa New Zealand understand their place in democracy. We have done this with the four aims of the strengthening democracy project in mind:

1. To increase understanding of the concept of democracy.
2. To identify its strengths and weaknesses.
3. To appreciate the way the democratic process plays out, especially in terms of checks and balances in New Zealand.
4. To encourage active participation in the democratic process especially beyond school at either the local or national level.

We first looked at the second aim and identified some strengths and weaknesses with the voting system of Mixed Member Proportional (MMP). This system was voted in in 1993 and was first used in NZ in 1996. The system has proven itself to lead to more diverse representation in Parliament almost overnight, as the share of seats taken by minor parties (any party not National or Labour) shot up from 4% to 33% of seats. This is a major strength, because it means that more people in our country get their unique, individual voices heard, leading to a stronger and more representative democracy.

A major weakness of this system, however, is its complexity. In the majority of countries the system is First Past the Post (FPP), where each person receives one vote for their preferred candidate. Even though parties exist, you do not assign a vote to them directly (New Zealand formerly used this system). In MMP however, you vote for your preferred representative from your electorate, and also for your preferred party. The party vote does not have to go to the party of the electorate candidate. Then seats in Parliament are assigned based on the 'party vote'. This complicated system could confuse anyone, especially new migrants who are used to a different system and may have never even heard of MMP. This means that migrants might use their vote, in a way that does not represent their voice. Or be so confused that they do not vote at all. This removes an important demographic from our decision making and creates a weaker democracy overall.

So the natural next question is 'What can we do to fix this?' We know from speakers from the workshops that there are many different checks and balances in New Zealand's democracy, as referenced by the third aim of the Strengthening Democracy project. This includes the right to protest, for good or bad, and select committee submissions. However, the most obvious one is the most important: elections. Before we consider educating migrants about the other checks and balances, the first priority is getting migrants voting.

To this end, we created a simple and interactive MMP voting simulator especially for new migrants to New Zealand. The goal is to help people new to the country understand how New

Zealand's democracy works, especially in regards to how their two votes directly affect who gets into Parliament and how the government is formed.

Without the knowledge of how their votes will specifically affect the government, migrants may feel unsure about their role in politics here in Aotearoa New Zealand. But they have a special power in our democracy; they have an outside perspective. They may have fresh and different ideas that could lead to changes in everyday life for New Zealanders, and may also encourage electoral reform.

For example, as Andrew Butler KC, Law Lecturer at Victoria University, noted, New Zealand is one of the very few countries who do not have a written constitution, partially because our parliamentary system is derived from the Westminster system used in Britain. In lieu there is a collection of parliamentary laws and court rulings that make up our 'uncodified constitution' along with documents like Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Migrants arriving in New Zealand might favour a written constitution, which could be beneficial in setting some 'unbreakable' foundation laws. Other outside perspectives in our elections would also be good for New Zealand, and understanding MMP is key to this.

It is worth noting that migrants to New Zealand are able to vote once they are residents (no citizenship required) and have lived in the country for one year continuously. Stats NZ states that net migration of the year ending January 2024 was 133,800. This means that, provided these people stay here for a few years, they will contribute a large portion of voters and are a significant influence on our democracy.

We created this voting simulator to help these important new migrants learn how the voting system works in a fun and easy way. The simulator lets users allocate party vote percentages and electorate seats within their own election. It then directly takes those results, and represents them as how they would look inside the house, even displaying what parties could form a coalition. This helps users understand the importance of coalition-building in New Zealand's MMP system and also what an overhang is. We hope that this will increase understanding of the concept of democracy amongst migrants, by being supplied to them on arrival and before they are granted permanent residency and are eligible to vote.

Next steps

There is still more work to be done in introducing new migrants to our country's democracy. Since they make up a large portion of our population, it is important for them to participate in other parts of the system. Just as much as the wider population, it is important to educate migrants and refugees, even those who cannot vote yet, about other ways to participate in democracy, like protesting, unionising and making submissions to select committees. Unlike the majority of people, who go through school in Aotearoa before they can vote, migrants need to be reached in other ways. This could be done through education at workplaces identified as having a high migrant workforce or in the process of naturalization (becoming a citizen).

Saint Patrick’s College Wellington
Team Members: Sam Agate, Tom Agate, Charles Burns, Sami Ghanem, Fergus Herbet