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Abstract: This article suggests that it is important to look at the early decades of elections in New Zealand’s political history, a time when many believe that politics was undemocratic and political participation was low. In order to evaluate this issue statistics on the numbers voting and electorates contested have been generated by extensive newspaper research for the general elections in the period 1853 to 1876, on which there is little information. In these early elections the issues lay more in the failure to register on the electoral rolls and considerable numbers of uncontested electorates than in exclusion due to the property franchise or failure to vote by those registered. The article concludes that politics was more democratic and participation higher than usually thought. In the latter part of the nineteenth century increases in registration and in voter turnout are examined as a precursor for political parties and high levels of political participation that became characteristic of modern-day electoral politics in New Zealand.

The introduction of MMP and the emergence of a more complicated electoral calculus than existed under the two-party system has heightened interest in patterns and trends in voting. The publication in 2003 of a book by Neill Atkinson, *Adventures in Democracy*, to mark the 150 years since the first parliamentary elections took place in New Zealand in 1853 has underlined the existence of a gap in understanding of our electoral past. Published voting statistics begin only in 1879. Earlier than this we lack basic information on how many electors voted and the number of contested and uncontested electorates.

The gap is a serious one since the preceding 25 years or so from 1853 comprised the formative period in New Zealand’s political history in which its representative parliamentary system consolidated. During this time the electoral system was established, and the miners’ franchise, the secret ballot and the Maori seats in Parliament were introduced. At the end of the period universal male suffrage was introduced in 1879.

Many years ago Leslie Lipson described much of the nineteenth century as an undemocratic period in which political participation remained limited. This statement has remained largely unexamined. New Zealand’s early decades appear characterised by turbulent and petty corruption in seemingly undemocratic elections. It is likely that this gap has remained because of the sheer difficulty of reconstructing the figures for elections that were strung over a period of months and were reported only in fragmented fashion, election by election, in newspapers. But

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its continued existence perpetuates a misleading impression of the character of early New Zealand politics.

This article presents for the first time comprehensive voting figures for general or ‘European’ seats for all general elections prior to 1879. Participation in the political process was considerably broader than one might expect from Lipson's analysis. This is suggested by the liberal nature of the property franchise, the extent of registration and the composition by occupation of electoral rolls, and the rising proportion of contested elections and electors casting their votes. The issue of limited participation has to be rephrased as a question of the extent to which candidates were prepared to stand in elections as well as the turnout of voters. In early elections it was the number of uncontested electorates more than low turnouts which affected overall levels of participation.

The Property Franchise and Voter Registration

The first matter is the nature of the property-based franchise. How restrictive was it? It is often believed that the property requirement excluded a large proportion of adult males but this is unlikely. Under the Constitution Act 1852 adult males qualified who owned a freehold property worth £50 for six months or more, leased property of annual value £10 for three years, or occupied a household of annual value £10 in town or £5 in the country where they had resided for at least six months.

The freehold qualification was itself not a very substantial barrier. As little as a quarter acre in a town sufficed. But the critical provision for creating a relatively broad franchise was the ‘household’ qualification. This meant merely living in a modest dwelling (whether owned or rented). Once settled, people from a wide range of social groups had little difficulty in qualifying this way. The rent of a reasonable cottage-type dwelling of four rooms might come to 10s a week or £20-25 per annum, with wage levels at 8s or more a day or £60-100 per annum.

Contemporary claims were indeed that the household provision made the franchise relatively universal. Even prior to the first elections of 1853 it was pointed out that the household qualification effectively abolished any property restrictions. Working men were advised to seize the opportunity and advance their cause, both by voting and standing for election. Shortly thereafter Governor Gore Browne in 1855 observed that ‘universal suffrage is practically in force’ as a result of price and wage inflation. This point was reiterated frequently within Parliament. W.B. Mantell argued in 1868 that the notion of a vote in trust for others did not apply – ‘there was almost manhood suffrage, everybody represented himself’. C.E. Haughton believed that a 'scarcely habitable' hovel gained the franchise, while Vincent Pyke expostulated...

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2 The four Maori seats and the extent to which Maori voted are not dealt with in this article.
4 Based on material from a draft paper on New Zealand's standard of living in the nineteenth century. Indications are that rent consumed about one-fifth of a working man's wages. Housing was perennially short and rents were relatively high.
6 New Zealander, 1 June 1853, William Griffin.
8 NZPD, Vol. 4, 1868, p. 244.
that ‘it is impossible to find a hut in the country anywhere that is not of the annual value of £5. If that is called property qualification, it is the biggest sham in the world’. 9

Occupational analysis of those registered in the early electoral rolls supports this. It suggests that a full cross-section of social groups was represented and that manual wage earners were not excluded. 10 Artisans and labourers formed about 40 percent of all those listed in the rolls of 1854-5. The household qualification was just as important as owning land. Some 45.0 percent qualified by freehold, 43.9 percent by household and 11.1 percent by leasehold. Labourers largely qualified by household (71.6 percent). Such proportions of artisans and labourers found in the rolls compare well with the proportions recorded in censuses of the period which indicate about one-quarter of the workforce were artisans and another one-fifth were labourers. 11

But to what extent did those qualified actually register in order to vote? Was registration itself a substantial hurdle? Registration involved claiming the right to be put on the roll at the local resident magistrate’s office, with a statement of qualification based on address and basis for qualification. 12 Provisional lists would be compiled by magistrates, published for objections to be made, and a final roll drawn up and published.

In the 1850s registration was easy and the rolls were not carefully scrutinised. 13 Minimal objection was raised to prospective electors since objectors had to serve their objections personally on those challenged. Personation did occur and fictitious electors were not that uncommon. Those who died or had moved away were not diligently removed from the rolls.

If the number of electors is compared to the adult male population of the 1850s the proportion is surprisingly high at 70-80 percent. This was the product of the political enthusiasm of those early years, as reflected in the Constitutional Associations of the various settlements, but was also the result of gross inflation of the rolls. The proportions registered varied considerably by province depending upon the rigour of enrolment practices, ranging from a low of around 50 percent of adult males in Canterbury to a high of about 120 percent in Auckland. 14 In Auckland’s early tempestuous political years there were hundreds more registered electors than adult males. Wellington’s rolls were similarly suspect. It was claimed in 1855 for example that at least 150 of the 745 names on the roll for Wellington City should have been struck out, most having left the place. 15 The other reason for large numbers relative to the adult male population was plural registration because of multiple landholding. In 1855 in Auckland 19 percent of those registered were plural electors; they were potentially able to cast 25 percent of the total votes. 16

Tightening up of registration took place in 1858 because of the chaotic nature of the rolls. The Registration of Electors Act 1858 required registrations in March each year with the rolls prepared by registration officers, printed forms witnessed by a JP or magistrate, and application

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10 Detailed analysis of rolls for all provinces apart from that for Taranaki not available for the period. Analysis by type of qualification excludes Nelson for which this information is lacking. See H.J. Hanham, The Political Structure of Auckland, 1853-76 (M. A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1950), Appendix 3, for a similar analysis of Auckland’s early electoral rolls.
11 See B.G. Hardie, et al., Statistics of New Zealand for the Crown Colony Period, 1840-1852 (Department of Economics, University of Auckland, 1954). In the first national census of 1858 22.5 percent of the labour force were skilled artisans and 20.0 percent labourers.
14 Herron, The Structure and Course of New Zealand politics, pp. 92-6. He provides an overall figure of about 80 percent of adult males registered, comparable to my calculations of 71 percent in 1853-4 and 78 percent in 1855-6.
15 New Zealand Spectator, 28 November 1855.
16 Hanham, The Political Structure of Auckland, chapter 4 and Appendix 3, especially pp. 53-4, 60.
subject to greater scrutiny by registration officers. There was a substantial penalty of £20 for making a false claim. Revision or ‘purification’ of the rolls became much more rigorous. This had some effect in Auckland and Wellington where defective rolls were most evident.

Wellington Province carried out a ‘census’ in 1858 with the objective of rendering the electoral roll ‘as perfect as possible’. This suggested that 48.6 percent of adult males were both qualified and registered, another 25.3 percent were qualified but not registered, and 26.1 percent were unqualified. At the same time in the Auckland City electorate 1,300 names were removed and only 39 added.

But rolls were difficult to keep up-to-date and remained less than perfect. The Wellington rolls for the elections of 1860-1 contained 695 names, of whom some 72 were considered dead or absent. When they were revised after the election of 1871, about 600 names were objected to and taken off the roll and another 600 new electors were added.

Following the 1858 legislation it became much more difficult to enrol and complaints about the system were persistently voiced. Most newspapers early in the year felt it necessary to mount campaigns to enrol electors. One newspaper believed that the requirement to sign the form before a magistrate was tantamount to a ‘virtual disqualification’ in rural districts because of difficulties of travel, and another complained of the minutiae of the form. Elector’ agreed – people should be able to register year-round and registration officers should fill in forms with electors only having to sign them. E.J. Wakefield, having narrowly been re-elected to a seat in the 1871 election, pointed to considerable defects. The office of the registration officer should be open all year; there should be a schedule of sufficient evidence for qualification; the process for objections should be formalised, with a proper, public record and requirement of definite proof; and rolls should be printed close to elections. The Otago Daily Times complained likewise that registration was ‘unnecessarily cumbersome. There are persons who suppose they should be able to register one day and vote the next [but] … Not till six months after the last day of claims to vote being sent in, can the claimant exercise his privilege of voting.’

Thus it is not too surprising that, after the initial enthusiasm of the 1850s waned, the extent of registration slumped to around 40 percent of adult males during the 1860s. But there was another underlying factor – the changing population distribution. During the 1850s the towns based on the original settlements of the 1840s provided relatively compact geographical electoral blocs that could be mobilised easily. In the 1860s populations were much less settled and far more dispersed as assisted immigration was opened up, goldminers flooded in, and settlement was extended beyond the towns and into the rural areas and backblocks poorly

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18 Wellington Provincial Gazette, 1858, return attached to issue of 2 November. Table heading for those not qualified is erroneously labelled ‘Number qualified’. For those not qualified this was likely due to the residence requirement. New Zealand experienced a large migrant inflow at that time.
20 Wellington Independent, 8 January 1861.
21 Wellington Independent, 18 May 1871.
22 Wellington Independent, 1 March 1871. It noted that an organisation had been formed to ‘cleanse’ the rolls. See also Evening Post, 17 January 1876.
23 Wellington Independent, 8 March 1861, editorial. Press, 3, 4 February 1871. A disgruntled working man complained of being struck off the rolls in 1866 without any justification. Press, 2 March 1866. He believed that many of the nearly 300 who had been removed were working men.
24 Press, 10 February 1871.
served by transport. Increasing numbers of males were migratory; in urban areas they lived in boarding houses and in rural areas they were accommodated in temporary camps or huts for shearing, agricultural, public works and bush work.

The practical implications for participation in politics were profound. Those recently arrived in the country or the district did not qualify to go on the roll while those on the roll found it very difficult to vote. Concern surfaced that the franchise had become more restrictive. It was the residential provision of six months combined with the difficulties of registration and casting a ballot, rather than the property-based franchise, which created problems.

But what about the extent to which people, once on the roll, exercised their privilege of voting? While there has been some detailed study of Auckland’s early years and of particular elections we lack overall figures across general elections that could supplement the statistics for New Zealand’s general elections that have been published since 1879. We now consider the figures for the elections in the period 1853 to 1899, particularly those from 1853 and up to the elections of 1875-6 for which there are no voting figures. Extensive newspaper research for the missing elections has resulted in the compilation given in Table 1.

### Table 1: General Elections, 1853 to 1899

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election</th>
<th>Electorates (General)</th>
<th>Total Members</th>
<th>Contested electorates</th>
<th>% of electorates contested</th>
<th>Members in contested</th>
<th>% of members contested</th>
<th>Votes cast in contested electorates</th>
<th>Electors reg. in contested electorates</th>
<th>Number of voters (readj.)</th>
<th>% readjusted votes to reg.</th>
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<td>360,018</td>
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27 It was in the context of electoral legislation leading to manhood suffrage and triennial elections, on the motion of Alfred de Bathe Brandon, that the first official voting returns were laid on the Table of the House of Representatives. NZPD, Vol. 32, 1879, p. 7; Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives (AJHR), 1879, session II, H-18. Brandon wanted property to continue to have rights and for the residential qualification to be strengthened to prevent ‘demagogues’ swaying the ‘mob’. NZPD, Vol. 33, 1879, p. 12.

28 The figures in the table are presented as aggregated from a large number of scattered newspaper sources. Their approximate nature must be appreciated even if they are presented as precise numerical totals. A small extent of undercounting exists because in a few cases in early years results were declared before numbers from all polling stations had come. There are inevitable discrepancies due to the variability of reporting of election results in different newspapers, sometimes prior to an official result being declared and before a few informal votes were discounted. On the other hand the multiple reporting in various newspapers aids in confirming the voting figures (bearing in mind that results tended to be reprinted or relayed by telegraph). In two elections in 1855 despite all endeavours it proved impossible to determine definite results. For Omata, Alfred East won by six votes over another candidate but the number of votes was not known. An estimate is made on the basis of the adjacent Grey and Bell electorate. For Wairau, the election was postponed because of a breakdown in postal communications and William Wells was presumably eventually elected unopposed. These caveats do not affect the general weight of the figures.
From the elections of 1853 to 1879 and again from 1890 to 1899 there were a number of multi-member electorates in which electors were able to cast votes corresponding to the number of representatives to be elected. These multiple votes have to be taken into account. Otherwise we get an inflated impression of the extent of voting by electorate and cannot deal with fluctuations caused by the changing number of multi-member electorates.

For the period 1893-1899 actual figures on the extent to which electors cast multiple votes in the four three-member urban electorates of those elections are available in the New Zealand Official Year Book; these are presented in the table. These figures indicate that electors almost always cast their full quota of three votes. The readjustment for 1890 is based on the average extent to which such urban electors cast their votes for the following three elections. For the period 1853-1879 the adjustment has to be made on the assumption (probably reasonable, on the basis of the figures for the 1890s) that electors at that time also cast their full quota of two or in some cases three votes. This readjusts the figures on the basis that electors cast only a ‘single’ vote and gives a basis for the extent of participation compared to elector registrations for those electorates. This is perhaps a somewhat severe downwards adjustment but there is little choice if voter participation is to be gauged more realistically. In the following discussion voting percentages refer to the voting figures as readjusted and to contested electorates only. This is necessary given the large numbers of uncontested electorates through much of the early decades.

**Candidate Selection**

The English style of election was followed through much of the nineteenth century. General elections would be spread over weeks if not months in different parts of the country. (It was not until 1881 that general elections were held on the same day throughout the country.) When there was a vigorous contest, as might occur in the major towns, the election assumed an exciting character as processions were organised, people wore ribbons and rosettes, and the rival parties engaged in vitriolic attacks on each other in meetings and in the newspapers. The 1858 legislation attempted to prevent some of the more colourful elements of elections but was only partly successful. Elections continued to be dramatic occasions and a major source of interest and entertainment for local communities.

Candidates would be put forward by means of a ‘requisition’. This was a long list of signatures of supporters published in local newspapers, requesting the candidate to stand. This would be followed by canvassing of voters and public meetings. On a specified day at the hustings the formal nomination of candidates would take place. Often there would be only one nomination, in which case the returning officer immediately declared that person the representative for the electorate and the successful candidate would give a speech thanking the electors present. If there was a contest, rival candidates would give speeches to the assembled crowd. Candidates usually rejected giving any pledges to electors. As one candidate, Captain Rhodes, said, ‘he looked upon himself as a representative, not as a delegate – a representative not only of one

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29 It is likely that this was indeed the case. In the Wellington City election in late 1855 513 electors cast 1,328 votes for the three representatives to be elected. In the same electorate in 1861 521 electors cast 1,556 votes for three representatives. Wellington Independent, 14 November 1855, 8 January 1861. In 1876 the voting pattern in Thames was noted as unusual for the large number of single votes in a two-member electorate, Nelson Daily Times, 14 January 1876.
place, but of the whole Colony’. Finally there would be the call for a show of hands by electors who were present. Almost invariably the losing candidate(s) would then demand a formal poll.

The poll would take place some days later. Polling day could be turbulent and corrupt practices were at times evident, particularly in Auckland but also in Wellington in the 1850s where bribery, corruption, treating with liquor and impersonation of voters was sufficiently widespread to prompt the reform legislation of 1858. The public nature of voting encouraged these practices as it did intimidation at times. Not only did the poll identify voters by name on signed voting slips, but the voting papers could be inspected by anyone who paid a shilling after the poll. Tallies of how the poll was going were available during the day, betting based on the progress of polls was not uncommon, and canny voters called ‘trimmers’ would wait until close to the end before jumping on the bandwagon of the likely winner. Some took advantage of the custom of treating by partaking and then nevertheless voting for the other candidate.

One story emerged from the 1866 elections in which turnout reached an unprecedented low level and voters were in short supply. One of the two candidates promised a self-proclaimed ‘independent’ voter £50 for his vote and gave him half the note in advance, retaining the other half to make sure of his support. The rival candidate got wind of the move and persuaded the man to give him the half-note while giving him another complete £50 note. With the poll tied and the booths shortly closing the man marched up to the booth and duly voted for the second candidate to the shock of the first. The second candidate not only won the election by a single vote but then contacted his rival, charging him with bribery with the evidence of the half-note in his possession. He threatened to take him to court unless he sent him this half-note. This was done, leaving the defeated candidate seriously out-of-pocket and the victorious one with £50 to replace the £50 very effectively expended on the ‘independent’ voter.

Voting more than once by those who held property in different electorates was made relatively easy when polls were conducted on different days. Such plural voting was a recognised and accepted practice for much of the nineteenth century, adding to the drama of closely fought elections. The extent to which plural registered electors actually voted more than once is extremely difficult to determine, however. Such electors were obviously prosperous and appeared to be concentrated around major population centres. Those who have examined the phenomenon have concluded that the broad impact of plural voting was not particularly great but that it could become important in hotly contested elections where majorities were small.

In 1861 prominent cabinet minister Frederick Weld was unexpectedly beaten in a close poll in Wairau. A major reason for his defeat was the failure of a dozen electors living in Nelson to get beyond Richmond and into the electorate to vote, because of impassable rivers. In 1871 the Wairarapa seat was strenuously contested. A ‘Wairarapa elector’ implored those in Wellington who also qualified to come to the polls and vote for one candidate, Henry Bunny. ‘Besides, a drive over our Alpine road [the Rimutakas], with its unrivalled scenery … will, I am sure, afford … a day of much pleasure and recreation.’ Coaches were provided for prospective Bunny voters to travel to Featherston and he was victorious at the polls. In 1876 Walter Buller had

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31 Otago Witness, 7 April 1866.
33 Lyttelton Times, 9 March 1861.
34 Wellington Independent, 19, 25 January, 2 February 1871.
majority support from local residents in the Manawatu electorate but was 'swamped' by non-resident Wellington electors who travelled north by coach. He lost the election.

The 1853 Elections

The first elections were laboriously conducted over the months July to October 1853. In these first elections there were 5,849 registered electors and 4,094 votes recorded. On a readjusted basis an estimated 2,080 people voted, comprising the substantial proportion of 62.4 percent of those registered in such electorates. While turnout was high in those seats which were contested, in a majority of seats there was great difficulty obtaining candidates at all. In more than half (13) of the 24 electorates, involving 20 of the total of 37 members of the House, candidates were elected without opposition.

Compared to the first provincial elections over the same period, those for the General Assembly aroused markedly less interest. In the early decades provincial politics and General Assembly politics were intimately related but often to the detriment of the latter. As the Lyttelton Times commented: ‘So far as a great majority of the inhabitants of Canterbury turn their attention at all to political matters, the General Government is nothing and the Provincial Government is everything.’ It was the provincial council chambers in which many of the crucial political issues of the time were fought out – disposal of land, because provinces created and administered their own land regulations; bringing in of immigrants, for this also was their responsibility; and the financing and commissioning of public works, at the centre of colonial infrastructural development.

While the electorate might be reasonably enthusiastic about going to the polls when there were candidates to choose from, it was a different matter to find politicians willing to go to Auckland. E.G. Wakefield commented in 1853 that the ‘elections seemed to be considered a mere form of mockery, and nobody attended to them seriously’. Henry Sewell was elected for Christchurch Town in 1855: ‘I took not the smallest pains, and felt not the slightest interest in my election … [there was] a unanimity most tame and uninteresting’. A description by Edward Jollie of his winning the Cheviot County by-election in December 1859 is often cited. ‘I was returned without opposition and without being present at the election. I made no speeches and no promises! Elections in those days were not considered of much consequence. Settlers had so much to occupy them in attending to their own affairs and were so widely scattered about, that but few electors, & then only those in the immediate vicinity of the place of nomination cared to attend.’ In another case from the 1855-56 elections J. Valentine Smith was elected unopposed for Wairarapa-Hawke’s Bay when his adversary, Charles J. Pharazyn, did not turn up and only five electors were available to demand a poll. In the rural Otago Hampden electorate in 1861 the returning officer waited in vain for anyone to turn up for nomination. As he packed up to go Captain Thomas Fraser arrived and to his astonishment was rapidly elected as soon as two electors (one a local clergyman) could be found to nominate him. Perhaps not surprisingly the
seat was declared vacant the following year because of Fraser’s absence from Parliament. In Riverton in 1866 only two or three electors were present at the nomination.42 Matters were delayed because one candidate’s proposer and seconder did not arrive. One elector demanded that the election proceed and the returning officer capitulated. The other candidate was proposed, seconded and declared duly elected uncontested.

And then there was the matter of getting to Auckland before the seat of government moved to Wellington in 1865. Otago members took a full two months in 1854 and swore to travel via Australia rather than contemplate the government brig again. Sewell was to observe on his arrival in Auckland, having again experienced the sea voyage by the faster steamer: ‘it is almost impossible to get fit men in the South to stand for the General Assembly … The great misery of our progress to the place of Assembly lies in the repeated stoppages, with the consequent renewal, at each remove, of the horrors of a sea-voyage.’43 C.W. Richmond wrote: ‘Honours which envolve [sic] an absence from the homestead of 3 or 4 months, a sea voyage, the discomfort of a long residence in lodgings in a strange place and plenty of hard work for a payment which scarcely covers necessary expenses, are at a decided discount amongst our practical settlers.’44

Although the New Zealand Parliament (at the urging of Edward Gibbon Wakefield) endowed its representatives with payment for attendance of £1 a day, this was small recompense for farmers, merchants, businessmen and others who had to spend months away from their work. Members had to be persuaded to attend and stay for the entire session. Many failed to arrive on time or resigned as the session loomed. Others left before the session had finished. Some felt that they had to pledge to go to Auckland if necessary when standing in elections.45 But in Otago in 1860 neither of the two successful Dunedin City candidates wanted to go to Auckland. One, Thomas Dick, said it would be a considerable sacrifice ‘but it was necessary that some one should go’ to the next session.46 He could not promise to attend beyond that.

With the elections of 1853 over, Governor George Grey stalled in calling the General Assembly. When the elected members finally assembled in Auckland in May 1854 it was unclear how a ministry might be formed and how power might be handed over to Parliament. The confusion of the first sessions of Parliament against the backdrop of the failure to clarify that the General Assembly was to govern in a fully ‘responsible’ fashion delayed the formation of an effective government and caused fresh elections to be held before too long.47

The matter of responsible government was not resolved until the new Governor, Sir Thomas Gore Browne, arrived in New Zealand towards the end of the short parliamentary session of 1855 at which only a rump of politicians attended. He confirmed Britain’s commitment to responsible government and prorogued parliament.48 With the issue of responsible government determined, it was felt that further elections were required so that the country could place its full confidence in those elected to form a responsible ministry.

These elections were held from October to December 1855. Southern members and in particular those of Wellington argued that the seat of government must be shifted to a more

42 Press, 8 March 1866, citing Southland Times, 2 March 1866.
43 NZPD, 1856, pp. 16–17.
45 For example Captain W.B. Rhodes and W. Waring Taylor, Wellington Independent, 27 November 1860.
46 Otago Witness, 22 December 1860.
48 NZPD, 1855, p. 557.
central position in the country.\textsuperscript{49} Certainly Isaac Featherston (Wellington’s Superintendent) stood on the popular plank of transferring government to Wellington, and immediately set about achieving it by having built much more spacious buildings with two chambers specifically to accommodate the two Houses of Parliament.\textsuperscript{50} In the elections of 1855, some 9,661 votes were cast, adjusted to 4,428 voters, just over 60 percent of registered electors.

The House of Representatives virtually had to start afresh, with only a small proportion of previous members returned. The formation of the brief Sewell and Fox ministries in the early weeks of the session of 1856 represented the necessary jockeying preliminary to the members settling into more stable factional alliances. Edward Stafford managed to put together a coalition of ‘centralist’ members together with Auckland provincialists into a stable majority and a stable executive, which was able to last for the next five years and until after the next general elections.

**Participation in the 1860s**

By the 1860 session a greater degree of continuity in the personnel of the House of Representatives had been established and a clearer distinction had been created between the government and a recognised opposition, even if a substantial floating group of independents remained in the middle.\textsuperscript{51} Premier Stafford was just capable of mustering a majority. The session was dominated by the war that had by now erupted in Taranaki. The Governor and ministry was much criticised for the delay in calling Parliament and for involving the country in a war without consultation. But while the ministry’s survival was on a knife-edge and it was able to get its measures through only with extreme difficulty, William Fox’s opposition wanted the government to bear the consequences. ‘As they had sown so let them reap’, he stated.\textsuperscript{52} The war dominated over provincialist cleavages, with a general split between a more warlike south and a moderate and conciliatory north.

The elections were held over the months of December 1860 to March 1861. While there was a substantial increase in the number of contested electorates, this was because of the great expansion in the number of electorates as New Zealand’s settler population grew rapidly; it did not reflect increased voter participation. Indeed fewer bothered to cast their ballots and in Auckland, even though almost all electorates were contested, the vitriolic hard-fought battles of the 1850s had passed. As the local newspaper the Southern Cross observed, there was an absence of great principles to be fought over, the speeches lacked vigour, and the crowds were orderly and good tempered. Its competitor the New Zealander noted: ‘a contested election in these days – thanks to the new Electoral Laws … is a tame and very respectable affair’.\textsuperscript{53}

Wellington elections were similarly much more muted even if turnout was high. The poll was a struggle between the two organised factions led by Featherston and the Radical Party’s E.J. Wakefield, but there was ‘no music, flags, cockades, or party emblems’.\textsuperscript{54} In the developing country areas rural concerns took precedence. There were no contests in Wanganui or Rangitikei; harvest was in full swing, and in Rangitikei polling stations in settler’s houses had

\textsuperscript{49} Wellington Independent, 3 November 1855. Southern Cross, 14 December 1855. New Zealander, 23, 26 January 1856.
\textsuperscript{50} Martin, The House, pp. 38-9.
\textsuperscript{52} NZPD, 1860, p. 486.
\textsuperscript{53} New Zealander, 1 December 1860; Southern Cross, 18 January 1861.
\textsuperscript{54} Wellington Independent, 8 January 1861.
failed to take account of changed electorate boundaries. The nearest settler was some 26 miles away from the southern booth.\textsuperscript{55} Nelson was similarly affected by harvest operations.

Further south in Canterbury little interest was shown. Most seats were filled unopposed; very few electors were present for Crosbie Ward in Lyttelton and Thomas Rowley in Ellesmere, and when A.R. Creyke was elected to Avon not one elector was there.\textsuperscript{56} In Otago the same malaise was evident. The Otago Witness worried: ‘Elections go by apparently without one-half of the electors being aware that anything of the sort is happening’ and ‘there is apparently less inclination to meddle with public affairs than at any previous period’.\textsuperscript{57}

Elections in rural areas were difficult to organise, what with the sparse populations, long distances and difficulties of transport.\textsuperscript{58} Flooded rivers, poorly located polling stations and breakdowns in transport made voting something of a feat, particularly for working men who would have to forfeit one or more work-days to vote. An indication of the difficulties is given by the example of Southland’s country districts returning officer who in 1871 had to ride nearly a thousand miles in three weeks to oversee the elections.\textsuperscript{59} Even getting the results reported could be an ordeal. In Wairau in 1855 a breakdown in postal communications caused the election to be postponed and never reported in the local newspaper. In 1876 reporting on the hotly contested election in Franklin was delayed by two failed attempts to get the result back to Auckland by pigeon post.\textsuperscript{60}

Overall, the proportion of adult males registered had fallen away dramatically to around 40 percent, while the numbers of votes cast substantially dropped in spite of the population increases. On a readjusted basis only 4,061 people voted (46.8 percent of electors) – a very small proportion of just over 10 percent of the adult male population. The editor of the \textit{Lyttelton Times} shook his head in print – it all seemed topsy turvy and unpredictable, particularly in the North Island (aside from the organised elections in Wellington), while in the south there was marked lack of candidates and interest.\textsuperscript{61} In spite of another huge turnover in membership of the House and a change in the balance of opinion within provinces over the war, the House of Representatives was left much as before – equally divided over the war.\textsuperscript{62}

Some were concerned at the lack of interest in politics; others accepted it as the reality of colonial politics as long as aspiring candidates were still returned to inhabit the halls of power. James FitzGerald noted that the difficulty was ‘not to restrain or control the popular power, but to persuade a great part of the people to take any interest at all in public affairs’.\textsuperscript{63} One ‘working man who has no claim’ proclaimed to ‘the working men of Canterbury’ in exhorting them to vote – ‘Remember that God helps those who help themselves’ - but it would take some time before the populace was again mobilised.\textsuperscript{64}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{55} \textit{Wellington Independent}, 12, 15 February 1861.
  \item \textsuperscript{56} \textit{Wellington Independent}, 8 February 1861. Editorials, \textit{Lyttelton Times}, 5, 23 January, 27 February 1861.
  \item \textsuperscript{57} Otago Witness, editorials, 16 February, 2 March 1861.
  \item \textsuperscript{58} Atkinson, \textit{Adventures in Democracy}, pp. 36-40. Herron, ‘The Franchise and New Zealand Politics’, pp. 40-1, 44.
  \item \textsuperscript{60} \textit{New Zealand Herald}, 21 January 1876.
  \item \textsuperscript{61} \textit{Lyttelton Times}, 27 February 1861.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} FitzGerald, \textit{The Representation of New Zealand}, p. 31.
  \item \textsuperscript{64} \textit{Lyttelton Times}, 14 March 1860, advertisement.
\end{itemize}
It is difficult to pinpoint a single cause for the waning of political participation other than to ascribe it to the onset of war. A political pattern of contending parties led by Stafford and Fox respectively had become well-established and matters of routine government had become overshadowed by the war. Moreover, executive power since the formative 1858 session of Parliament had become entrenched, as evident in the prosecution of the war. The issues seemed to be more a triangular one of the executive versus the Governor versus the military, with Parliament and electors left very much on the sidelines. The other likely factor was declining enthusiasm for politics following the heady constitutional years of the previous decade. It was commented: ‘The novelty of our Constitution, and the legislative powers conferred by it, has passed off’. 65

Meanwhile provincial governments continued with their work during the 1860s, making strenuous efforts at enticing migrants, extending settlement on the land, and borrowing heavily for ambitious public works schemes. A greater degree of interest remained in provincial elections through this period; this was where things that mattered to local districts got done.

The next five years were characterised by instability and changes of government as ministries were undermined by war as they tried to grapple with its consequences, especially the financial burden, and suffered in the political struggle with Governor Grey. The ‘self-reliance’ policy that emerged in 1864 out of this confused period represented another step along the way towards full self-government. New Zealand would provide both financial and military resources to settle the conflict.

The elections of February to April 1866 – delayed to allow the drawing up of new electoral rolls – followed a substantial increase in South Island representation as a result of the goldruses. Issues of war were supplanted by those of finance – self-reliance and the removal of British troops, and the need for parsimony. 66 Registration of electors remained low at around 40 percent of adult males.

The number of votes cast in 1866 was merely 7,886 readjusted down to 5,844 voters – less than half of those registered in contested electorates and well below 10 percent of adult males. The apathy was reflected in a lack of candidates as well as the very low turnout. Less than 40 percent of both electorates and members were contested. The Press editorialised, ‘the greatest difficulty exists in getting men to come forward for the General Assembly’, and this was after the seat of government had moved to Wellington, making it easier for South Island representatives to get there. 67

But a feature of the elections was the organisation of Auckland province contenders, in the wake of losing the seat of government, into a bloc that swept into the House unopposed on the separation crusade. 68 From Mongonui in the far north to the huge electorates of Raglan and Franklin that extended southwards to the central North Island no opposition could be found. On the other hand many of the Canterbury seats were also filled unopposed, but contrarily on the anti-separationist platform. This phenomenon provide something of a counterweight to an impression of pronounced apathy, for the many uncontested electorates were the consequence of strong provincialist political initiatives.

The lack of direction in the elections seems to have resulted from the confused state of politics in the wake of the war. The seat of government had recently and controversially shifted to

65 Otago Witness, 2 March 1861.
67 Press, 21 February 1866.
Wellington, truncating sessions of Parliament. Ministries had rapidly replaced one another. Weld’s ‘self-reliance’ ministry expired in the face of Governor Grey’s autocratic manipulation and the lack of action by General Cameron in prosecuting the war. Weld resigned in October 1865 and was replaced by a reluctant Stafford. Opposition in the House dissolved; self-reliance no longer divided politicians but was widely accepted.69 There seemed few policy differences upon which electoral enthusiasm could be whipped up, with political lines extremely blurred.

The influx of goldminers from the early 1860s had contributed greatly to the swelling of the adult male population at this time but this was not reflected in more energetic political participation.70 (The 1860-1 election occurred just before goldminers arrived en masse in Otago.) In 1860 the Ministers’ Representation Act had created a completely separate franchise based on miners’ rights rather than the electoral rolls and made it very easy in theory for miners to vote. Unlike other electors, they did not have to register but simply had to turn up with their mining rights to vote. In 1862 a special electorate was created throughout Otago for those exercising their right under the miners’ franchise – the Otago Gold Fields District.71 Then in 1865 the Otago Gold Fields Towns electorate was created and in 1867 the Westland Boroughs electorate comprising Greymouth and Hokitika. (In 1870 the special electorates were abolished and miner voting was exercised in ordinary electorates until the franchise was itself abolished in 1879.)

In 1866 the Otago Gold Fields District returned its two members uncontested, as did the Bruce electorate (where much mining took place) for its single member. The huge goldmining electorate of Westland showed a meagre return of 364 votes (469 registered). It was won by Canterbury’s Superintendent W.S. Moorhouse over a local candidate. The correspondent of the Press thought that the apathy north of the Grey River (where only a single vote was recorded) was ‘ludicrous’. He complained: ‘the people seem perfectly indifferent to politics’.72

The confused elections produced considerable turnover once again in the enlarged House of Representatives. Premier Stafford was personally endorsed through the elections even if his ministers were not.73 Stafford’s ministry was reconstructed during the session of 1866, taking in some of Weld’s ministers.

This stronger ministry held together until 1869 as the ‘separation’ movement in Auckland petered out and as the provinces sank into a financial quagmire, with the economy going into recession in the late 1860s. A more energetic Opposition in Parliament by this time saw Fox again replace Stafford as Premier. This gave an opening for Julius Vogel to seize the moment, building on popular sentiment of rekindling the ‘sacred fire’ of colonisation by advancing in 1870 a bold and radical immigration and public works scheme that would revitalise the country.

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70 1861-71 Censuses of Population and Dwellings. Miners comprised about 15-20 percent of the labour-force during the 1860s, increasing from around 11,000 in 1861 to more than 21,000 by 1871. In 1864, as specified by the census, the number of adult males on the Otago goldfields was 11,838 and in 1867, 6,808. By this time gold had been found in Westland and Nelson also, which would have involved other large (but electorally unrecorded) populations of miners. The many miners remained unrecorded in electorates such as (in 1867) Westland North where 5 electors were registered for an adult male population of 8,249 together with Westland South, Westland Boroughs, Taieri, Bruce, Walkouait, Manuherikia, Hampden, Wallace and Otago Gold Field Towns. Some indication of their numbers are available for 1870. AJHR, 1870, D-49. These are the only published figures. By this time the Thames goldfield was booming (within the Franklin electorate) and goldfields had been opened up in Golden Bay and Nelson. On the West Coast nearly 10,000 were eligible in Westland North, Westland South, and Westland Boroughs, and a further 6,000 were eligible in the Otago Gold Fields special electorate. The total came to 20,300. This was more than half of the numbers of voters registered at that time. The number of goldminers declined during the 1870s. It was suggested that 25,000 held miners’ rights in 1875 but by 1879 the figure was only 3,693. NZPD, Vol. 16, 1875, p. 615; AJHR, 1880, H-17.

71 Atkinson, Adventures in Democracy, p. 47. Following the Representation Act of 1881 the large goldmining electorates disappeared as New Zealand adopted the principle of equal electorates based on population (modified by a country quota).

72 Press, 22 March 1866. The Goldfield Towns yielded only 152 votes (334 registered) while Manuherikia produced only 73 votes (174 registered).

The 1870s and the Creation of a National Political Community

By the time of the elections of January to February 1871 peace had replaced war and Maori affairs were supplanted by economic development. Attention began to shift towards national politics and away from the provincial legislatures as the provinces, burdened by debt, began to fade from the picture. The elections revolved around the policies of Vogel. For the first time a government went to the country on its policies.

The elections were a landmark in New Zealand’s political development. These were the first elections conducted by secret ballot. There were now polling booths for privacy and ballot boxes to keep voting secret. No longer could announcements (strictly illegal since 1858) be made of progress in polls before booths had closed. The secret ballot seems to have worked well around the country, although in the Wellington Country election it was alleged that some refused to vote when they discovered that numbers on the voting papers might identify them.

The major reason for the introduction of the secret ballot was the feared intimidation of voters, and particularly of working men. William Reeves had argued that it was ‘desired by the working classes in his district [the Avon electorate], because they believed it would relieve them from a pressure which was already being brought against them’.

Intimidation seems to have been an issue of most concern when isolated farms and stations were used as polling stations. Employers could easily establish how their workers had voted. Thus in 1861, for example, Weld, having been defeated in Wairau turned his attentions to the Cheviot electorate where he won in a very low poll of only 30 votes. Crucial to his victory were the employees of his own station in the district. Speaker David Monro’s election in 1866 was conducted in the woolshed of St Leonards, Amuri, with Monro proposed by powerful sheep runholder George Rutherford. The half dozen electors present acquiesced in Monro’s uncontested election.

Participation in the political process rose markedly in response to the secret ballot and as working men’s protection societies sprang up in the major centres, encouraging political involvement. Registration of electors moved upwards markedly from the 1860s to reach more than half of adult males in 1871. Far more candidates stood and many more electorates were contested. Some 22,944 votes were cast in 53 (out of 68) electorates, readjusted downwards only a little to 19,933 voters (59.3 percent of those registered). (Many of the multi-member electorates had been eliminated.) As one newspaper noted, ‘This revival in matters political is highly creditable to the community. It shows that the apathy which has so long existed is finally shaken off and that the people of the province [Wellington] are awakening to a sense of duty in laying claim to their political privileges in such numbers.’

Where there was a direct fight between Vogel supporters and those against Vogel the contests were vigorous, with the former most often winning. The Wellington City elections were

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77 *NZPD*, Vol. 1, 1867, p. 121.
78 *Wellington Independent*, 9 April 1861.
79 *Press*, 22 February 1866.
80 *Wellington Independent*, 18 May 1871.
particularly boisterous. Huge crowds assembled in town and some candidates were flour-bombed. Vans and other vehicles went backwards and forwards in search of voters. When the result of the poll was announced, vehicles crammed with excited people careered up and down the Beach [Lambton Quay] waving flags and tattered election posters in ‘a glorious scene of disarray’. Then the victors, Edward Pearce and George Hunter, went bowling along the Beach in a coach and six to ‘tumultuous hurrahing’.

For the first time, it was noted, a government ‘interfered’ with elections in the sense of ministers actively campaigning for particular candidates that would support the ministry. This was something new and foreign to a politics that would not countenance organised political parties and still expected political contenders to stand alone in making a case for their election.

Vogel obtained an emphatic endorsement of his policy, a number of anti-Vogel members lost their seats, and a large number of new members entered Parliament, many of them a new breed associated with Vogel and his policies. Such members were less educated, brasher and determined to use politics as a means of advancement. As the Wellington Independent observed, successful colonists were now standing in considerable numbers – ‘those who have by their own exertions achieved an independence’. These were men with ‘no party to please’ and ‘no office to seek’ who were independent in circumstances and opinion. They were ‘local’ in a new sense – they stood for election and were grounded in their local district of residence in which they had their material stake, and they were determined to gain for the district the fruits of Vogel’s development policy in the form of public works. Political patterns were beginning to change dramatically.

By now miners were beginning to engage with the political process as the special Otago Gold Field electorates were dissolved and the West Coast goldmining electorates were reorganised. Energetic candidates began to organise miners to get them to the polls. In the West Coast single-member electorates a great many would have used their miners’ rights to vote. In Buller 1,030 voted with 655 registered, in Grey Valley 1,544 voted versus 553, in Hokitika 1,037 votes versus 759, and in Totara (West Coast south of Hokitika) 359 votes versus 153 registered.

This burst of activity by miners brought with it some issues. Some hundreds of miner votes were disallowed in Grey Valley. In the Wakatipu electorate Arrowtown miners ‘swamped’ the poll, but all the same more than 60 miners were prevented from voting because of technical problems with their miners’ rights. One candidate paid a number of miners to get to the polling booth in Hampden in the Waitaki electorate but was defeated nonetheless.

The early 1870s was the era of central government assisted immigration and public works, as the provinces continued to struggle and then were abolished. Vogel dominated politics, whether in Parliament or not, as the country’s attention was fixed on colonial development. The parliamentary session of 1874 produced Vogel’s startling proposal to abolish the North Island

82 Wellington Independent, 8 February 1871.
83 Press, 9 February 1871, regarding the activities of Donald McLean and William Gisborne in particular. McLean succeeded in unseating longstanding independent MrR Hugh Carleton.
84 Wellington Independent, 16 January 1871.
85 Leslie, The General Election of 1871, p. 92. The Gold Fields District became Waikaia; Gold Field Towns became Tuapeka. Westland Boroughs, Westland North and Westland South became the new electorates of Buller, Grey Valley, Hokitika and Totara.
86 But in the Macraes district the miners were apathetic; they cared ‘little or nothing for politics, and almost laugh at them who do’. Otago Daily Times, 6 February 1871.
87 Otago Daily Times, 26, 27 January 1871. See also Press, 10 February 1871, reporting that many hundreds of votes had been disallowed in Grey Valley. Such problems with the validity of miners’ rights persisted as occurred in the Waikaia electorate in 1876. Bruce Herald, 18 January 1876.
88 Otago Daily Times, 7 February 1871.
provinces; the following session grappled with the implications of this audacious move as Sir George Grey swept back into politics on a provincialist platform. Implacable Opposition resistance to the Abolition of Provinces bill caused the government to compromise and suggest that the populace would have the final say on the matter in the next elections, which were held from December 1875 to January 1876.

New Zealand’s enfranchised population endorsed abolition of the provinces emphatically in a surge of electoral interest, even if provincialist reaction was strengthened in Auckland and Otago. There were vigorous campaigns in the major centres and in the goldmining centres of Thames and on the West Coast. There was more excitement in the Christchurch City elections than ever before as E.J. Wakefield, dragged down politically by his alcoholism, was soundly defeated. In Dunedin crowds gathered and cabs hustled around the centre bringing in voters as three anti-centralists swept in. A strenuous contest between an ‘ardent provincialist’ and an ‘uncompromising centralist’ in Port Chalmers was accompanied by extensive organisation. There was house-to-house canvassing, all available vehicles were hired and placarded, boats were engaged to bring voters across the harbour from Portobello and from around the coast from Purakanui, and non-resident voters were brought in from Dunedin in special trains.

In the country at large some 55 electorates (of 69) were contested and 39,100 votes cast, adjusted to 26,822 voters. Although the proportion of voters to those registered was slightly less than in 1871, this was only because the expansion of numbers on the roll outstripped the increase in voting. Significant changes were taking place nonetheless. The proportions of contested electorates and members in contested electorates increased even though the number of representatives had expanded by 10 to 84. Multi-member electorates had increased in number (in urban and gold-mining areas) from 6 to 13. Substantially more members (68) subjected themselves to voters than before with almost all multi-member electorates being contested. Voting was much more evenly spread across electorates, including rural ones, at around 50-70 percent of registered electors. Most seats were now contested and voter participation had reached relatively high levels of close to 60 percent.

Politics in the late 1870s began to shift noticeably. Sir George Grey, who had experienced a meteoric rise in politics, became Premier in 1877 promising radical reforms to taxation, land laws, the franchise and the electoral system. Little was achieved by his incompetent ministry, however, and conflict within Parliament reached new heights as Grey’s party sought to cast the differences as between true progressive Liberals and reactionary conservatives. Grey had a great impact on the style of campaigning by undertaking a national ‘stump’ tour in 1878 to whip up popular support for his government, and in 1879 by issuing a Liberal manifesto and organising Liberal Associations around the country. Massive public meetings were held and popular opinion was mobilised in a way not seen before. Support for Grey’s ministry in the House of Representatives collapsed, however, and Parliament was dissolved.

Elections were hurriedly held in August and September 1879. The Press, although extremely critical of the ‘stumping phenomenon’, described the elections as ‘perhaps the most exciting’ ever held in New Zealand. In Christchurch huge crowds attended polling day. Cabs bore...
candidates’ placards and shop windows and hoardings displayed political skits and cartoons. A boisterous crowd of some 2,000 assembled at the Oddfellows’ Hall to hear the result declared. Firecrackers and flour bombs were thrown and after it was declared that Grey himself topped the poll crowds of ‘larrikins’ paraded noisily, assembled in front of the Liberal Association’s rooms, and hurled various missiles before some were arrested.

The unprecedented level of public interest was reflected in the considerable increase in the proportion registered on the rolls - close to 70 percent of adult males - and the marked upsurge in voting to 48,506 voters (73.7 percent of electors). But this surge in popular involvement did not hasten party organisation nor did it strengthen the link between elections and the formation of governments. The result was stalemate and traditional factional methods of creating a majority still operated. Eventually John Hall was able to forge a government with the aid of four ‘Auckland rats’ who deserted Grey. Hall enacted much of the electoral legislation that had occupied public attention, including the introduction of triennial Parliaments and elections and full manhood suffrage.

Pressure had been mounting for a more inclusive franchise for some time. The rapid increase in immigration and the developing economy had created a less settled population that found it difficult to qualify under the existing residential requirements. In the cities, as a service sector became established, young male clerks who often lived in lodgings became of concern. A compromise Lodgers Franchise Act was passed in 1875 but its stringent conditions proved unworkable. The franchise applied only to those who occupied the same lodgings of annual value £10 for a year. Full manhood suffrage, now widely agreed upon by politicians, moved to centre stage. Following the defeat of Grey’s ministry and the assumption of power by Hall, manhood suffrage was introduced in 1879, along with a lowering of the freehold qualification to £25 and abolition of the leasehold qualification – by then only 4.4 percent of total registrations.

A much higher proportion of adult males registered following the introduction of full manhood suffrage – far beyond the plateau of 55-60 percent reached during the 1870s – with the proportion rising dramatically to close to 90 percent for the 1881 election. In the next decade registration would become comprehensive and for a time reach a proportion of more than 100 percent of adult males because of the persistence of the (lowered) freehold qualification that allowed for continued plural registration. In the 1890s when plural registration was abolished the level of registration settled at around 95 percent of the adult population.

A more confused period of politics was ushered in during the depression of the 1880s following the collapse of Grey’s populist ‘Liberalism’. The false dawn of the late 1870s gave way to retrenchment in government expenditure and fractured factionalism. Different parts of the country fought over the scraps of public works expenditure.

The 1880s and the 1890s

In 1881 for the first time the general election was held on the same day, 9 December, throughout the country. The number of electorates contested expanded and some urban areas began to display greater organisation in politics. The numbers voting increased as well, but not as fast as registration did. Nonetheless, just over half of all adult males (compared with 40

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95 Press, 11 September 1879. Bohan, To Be A Hero, pp. 276-9, describes the election in more graphic terms as one of the city’s most violent days.

96 The franchise applied only to those who occupied the same lodgings of annual value £10 for a year. New Zealand Herald, 8 February 1876.

97 AJHR, 1880, H-17.

98 Indeed in 1880 almost half of electors qualified on the freehold (47.8 percent), only slightly less than by residence or ‘manhood’ suffrage (52.2%), AJHR, 1880, H-17.
percent in 1879) voted in elections, at a time when a significant minority of seats remained uncontested.

From this time onwards greater proportions of working men in urban centres cast their votes, making up a majority of voters in some Dunedin electorates. Linkages were made between ‘radical’ candidates, concerted platforms, and organised urban labour through the Otago Trades and Labour Council. There were similar stirrings in Christchurch in 1884 associated with Grey in the 1884 election, the electorate, seduced by Vogel’s whirlwind return to the country, focused upon political leadership and delivered a verdict that was sufficiently clear-cut that Premier Harry Atkinson did not attempt to test his majority when Parliament met again. He resigned instead.

In 1887 virtually all electorates had competing candidates. Voting relative to registration had risen again to more than two-thirds of the swollen electoral roll that constituted well over 100 percent of the adult male population. Comparing the number of voters with the adult male population indicates the extent of the change: a 20 percent increase to a little over 70 percent, compared with 1881. There was now a move away from the localism dominated by public works expenditure towards colony-wide issues. As the depression refused to lift, retrenchment became the prevailing concern. The issues of protection versus free trade, the tariff and taxation gave rise to stronger divisions between city and country and the emergence of an identifiable and separate ‘working class’ interest in politics.

The election of 1890, although cast in the factional pattern of the old, was also the mechanism for ushering in the new world of organised politics by means of parties and co-ordinated manifestos. In winning a vote of confidence early in 1891 by way of election of a Speaker of the House, the Liberals created the first political party. Richard Seddon’s accession to the premiership in 1893 and his new style of energetically creating a cadre of loyal supporters consolidated this change, altering New Zealand politics for ever.

In 1893, with the introduction of female suffrage and with plural electors removed from the rolls, registration more accurately covered the entire eligible male and female adult population. Voters in that election (now male and female) comprised 75.3 percent of registered electors. From this time on a stable level of about three-quarters of electors voted. Virtually all seats were contested and turnout approached modern-day levels. In concert with the emergence of political parties during the 1890s New Zealand’s political system had assumed its modern form.

Conclusion

What shaped participation in politics during the nineteenth century? In the early years it is likely that the pent-up enthusiasm of colonists for representative and responsible government was a major factor in the relatively high levels of registration and voting (in those electorates which were contested). Migrants had come to the colony with the expectation of democratic engagement just as they had for getting onto the land. Taking charge of such a new colonial society at its birth was assumed by many.

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99 Angus, City and Country.
Political participation and electoral change

John E. Martin

Moving on a decade or so, political participation slackened as the country staggered under the impact of war and political instability. Provincialism stunted national political development. The emerging rural areas were sufficiently isolated that they were virtually disenfranchised. Registration consequently was at an all-time low, there were very low turnouts, and only a minority of seats were contested. The goldminer influx and special franchise did not in themselves seem to endow New Zealand with a strong democratic impulse. If miners made an impact it probably came later as they registered as electors and became settled and integrated into the country’s broader development.

But longer term processes were to broaden and intensify participation in national politics. By the 1870s, as the fortunes of the provinces waned and Vogelism held sway, issues were displaced into the national arena. Abolition of the provinces shifted the focus of politics and destroyed the basis for ‘provincial slates’ that had often resulted in significant numbers of uncontested electorates for the General Assembly and low voter turnout. This gave rise to an organised form of politics beyond provincialism and a direct linkage between platforms and policies.

Crucial improvements in transport and communications aided in the formation of a national political community. More rapid and reliable coastal steamship services and the construction of railways and roading integrated New Zealand’s scattered settlements, allowing much more rapid travel to many more destinations, including that of the seat of government in Wellington. The telegraph provided vital links from the late 1860s, with a central telegraphic office in Parliament Buildings allowing political news to be transmitted immediately around the country.

A more embracing and accessible political culture developed at the same time. The profusion of newspapers throughout the country and their strident political trumpetings drew the populace in and gave politicians public platforms. The availability of detailed and accurate reports of parliamentary proceedings (from 1867) in the official record and the extensive reporting of the same in the many newspapers promoted awareness of the General Assembly and encouraged debate. Newspapers became daily mass circulation partisan platforms for political points of view that increasingly took a national form.102 The creation of the Press Association in the 1870s consolidated a ‘nationalisation’ of the political news.

Popular participation in politics was enhanced. There was an upsurge of voting in the elections of 1871 that was consolidated in the elections of 1875-6. Registration rose significantly to more than half of all adult males, most electorates were contested, and the higher levels of voting were spread across many electorates.

From the late 1870s the proportions registered rose markedly, especially after manhood suffrage. Voting also increased but at a lesser rate, as working men now registered in great numbers and began to participate in politics more directly. By the 1890s democratic features in New Zealand’s electoral system had been extended from the secret ballot and manhood suffrage to abolition of plural voting and female suffrage. The high levels of elector registration and of voting in elections, together with the contesting of all electorates, accompanied these developments. The country had been forged into a unified political community that would manifest high levels of political participation and mass political party organisation into the twentieth century.

The early decades of elections were integral and important to these changes; they were not undemocratic ‘dark ages’ prior to an enlightenment in the late nineteenth century. It is important to be able to assess trends in political participation by means of adequate electoral statistics for this period. The creation of a national political community was a protracted process over 50

years. In the long run these changes gave rise to the highly democratic and participatory form of politics that would gain New Zealand an international reputation.