

Independent Electoral Review

2022



New Zealand Council Of
Christian Social Services

Contact Name:	Nikki Hurst Hamish Jarvie Rachel Mackay Melanie Wilson
Organisation Name:	New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS)
Ko wai au Who we are:	<p>The New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Independent Electoral Review.</p> <p>NZCCSS has six foundation members; the Anglican Care Network, Baptist Churches of New Zealand, Catholic Social Services, Presbyterian Support and the Methodist and Salvation Army Churches.</p> <p>Through this membership, NZCCSS represents over 250 organisations providing a range of social support services across Aotearoa. We believe in working to achieve a just and compassionate society for all, through our commitment to our faith and Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Further details on NZCCSS can be found on our website www.nzccss.org.nz.</p>

Tirohanga Whānui | Overview

We support the kaupapa to review Aotearoa New Zealand's electoral system. NZCCSS maintains that a well-functioning democratic system is central to our vision of a just and compassionate society for all. We particularly welcome this opportunity to make the electoral process fairer and more accessible.

Our main points are:

1. Lower the voting age to 16
2. Make voting accessible to people in prison
3. Increase public awareness and understanding of electoral system
4. Increase financial transparency
5. Extend the government term to four years
6. Expand representation in government

Taunakitanga | Recommendations

We raise the following points and recommendations for consideration:

1. Lower the voting age to 16

NZCCSS advocates for increased access to voting for young people in our communities. We strongly believe that the voting age should be lowered to 16 to enable youth engagement in the democratic processes that affect their lives and will be in place as they reach legal adulthood at 18.

NZCCSS members work with young people and their families in a variety of settings and advocate for the rights of young people to be upheld. We observe that 16-year-olds already participate in society through a range of decisions and responsibilities (including leaving home, exiting education, being employed, holding a drivers' or firearms license). They demonstrate interest and engagement in issues relating to legislation, policy and their communities, evidenced through participation in advocacy and volunteering.

Efforts to enable youth voice in Parliamentary or other government processes tend to be inconsistent in their approach and limited to just that – voice. They do not translate to enabling action in the form of voting:

“Our parliament has told us they recognise we care about our communities. They’ve told us we can give speeches on the importance of voting. They’ve told us we’re more than capable of discussing and debating complex issues, and our MPs have told us we should support their party policy...”

...The only thing not ‘real’ about Youth Parliament is that many of us will not have the right to vote in this year’s local election, or even next year’s general election. We’re part of thousands of young people who are told we are not smart enough or informed enough to vote.” (Cate Tipler in Fa’aoso, 2022)

Further, research in relation to lowering the voting age overwhelmingly supports this kaupapa. In 2021 researchers from the Universities of Montana and California collated existing evidence affirming the many positive reasons to lower the voting age and providing evidence challenging common misconceptions (Oosterhoff, Wray-Lake and Hart, 2021¹). This article is simply the most recent collation of evidence, shared by experts that have asserted their findings for well over twenty years. Many of the articles listed in the reference list would similarly be worth exploring and strengthen the point that lowering the voting age is overwhelmingly positive – and we have known this for a substantial amount of time.

Restricting the ability for young people to vote limits the rights of young people, and contradicts a full expression of both Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Article 3 of Te Tiriti confers the rights of citizenship to all Māori. There is no clear limitation on age. Article 1 affords Rangatiratanga, again with no limitation of age.

We strongly support the voting age being lowered to 16 years to welcome and encourage youth participation and perspective into the decisions being made about their lives today and for the future.

Recommendation 1: That the voting age be lowered from 18 to 16 years.

¹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1745691621994221>

2. Make voting accessible for people in prison

We also advocate for people in our prison system to be enabled to vote. This would recognise that the decisions being made in government affect them, their families, and their communities both inside and outside of the prison system. Enabling people to participate in the voting process whilst being in prison is a means of maintaining their sense of connection to society and upholding their rights and dignity. We note the Ministry of Justice recommendation to government in 2019 that our legislation should be changed to allow all prisoners to vote. We agree with this recommendation and the rationale being that:

“This option would be the most consistent with the Treaty of Waitangi and the Bill of Rights Act 1993 and the most consistent with fundamental democratic values. This change would be consistent with the objective of maximising participation in the electoral system.” (Ministry of Justice, 2019)

Restricting the ability for prisoners to vote impacts disproportionately on Māori participation in the democratic process due to the overrepresentation of Māori in our prison system. This undermines our commitment to Article 1 of te Tiriti which speaks to Māori holding rangatiratanga. It similarly contradicts the rights of citizenship conferred in Article 3.

NZCCSS strongly supports access to voting for people in prison as a fundamental right that must be upheld.

Recommendation 2: We advocate for voting to be accessible to all people in prison.

3. Increase public awareness of electoral processes

NZCCSS supports increasing efforts to raise awareness and understanding of Aotearoa New Zealand’s voting system among the public. Whilst the key driver of distributing this information is voter turnout, we suggest that the provision of information about the democratic system may be more accessible if it is provided on a regular basis, rather than simply during the lead up to an election, and provides content that speaks to the concept, values, and functions of democracy more broadly, rather than being so heavily focused on the voting process.

We appreciate the Electoral Commission’s use of the Orange Guy but equally see opportunity to use a diverse range of voices and tools to share information that enables voters to understand the voting process, identify which policy areas are of importance to them and make informed decisions about political candidates and parties. Communication strategies should be based on up-to-date knowledge of specific demographics and how they best receive information. This should consider a range of factors such as culture, age, and geography. The lived experience of engaging with government agencies may impact people’s perceptions of government communications. Our members report spending considerable time advocating for clients whose experiences in accessing entitlements or services from government agencies has been less than mana-enhancing, culturally appropriate or safe.

Voter turnout for the 2020 election indicates that Māori were consistently less likely to vote than non-Māori, across all age bands, indicating that more needs to be done to ensure our electoral system is accessible for Māori. We question what an electoral information campaign that was designed by Māori, for Māori might look like? What might the key messages be? What format would awareness-raising take?

We are genuinely excited for the implementation of the Aotearoa New Zealand Curriculum into schools. But remain very aware that for those that don't receive that education, easy access to good information is invaluable. And that this information is better shared consistently, over time and in a variety of accessible and informative ways. Not just 3 yearly, when we are facing an election. We also believe that there is the potential flow on impact of increasing social cohesion, through developing understanding of our democracy.

NZCCSS views the provision of appropriate and accessible information as central to an effective democratic system and welcomes increased resource to achieve this.

Recommendation Proposal 3: We support increased provision of appropriate information to support understanding of democracy and engagement in electoral processes.

4. Increase financial transparency

NZCCSS strongly advocates for greater financial transparency to support a fairer and more accessible electoral system. This includes transparency of campaign funding and a proportional cap on spending for elections. We note the changes established through the Electoral Amendment Bill in June 2022 which will require greater disclosure regarding financial and in-kind donations and loans received by political parties but believe these changes could go further to ensure greater transparency and fairness. As a suggested alternative, we propose that the names of all donors be disclosed and that a marker indicate where a donation is over \$1,000.

We support greater disclosure provided that the way information is disclosed does not present undue risk to safety for donors and complies with privacy law. We refer to the Privacy Commission's submission on the Electoral Amendment Bill which called for the addresses of donors to be withheld to align with the Privacy Act and protect donor safety.

Recommendation 4: We advocate for increased transparency of campaign funding whilst also protecting the rights and safety of donors.

5. Extend government term to four years

NZCCSS advocates for the government term to be extended to four years to foster greater political stability and effectiveness. We support the idea that a longer term of government would enable more focused and consistent implementation of policy. We believe that our MMP system provides sufficient accountability to limit any one party holding an extreme excess of power.

Our members spend a considerable amount of time adapting organisationally to new government strategies, policies, and contracting processes, all of which detract from their ability to meet the needs of clients. There is a significant cost to management, administration, and human resource in the continuous review of policies and programmes which is common with a change in government. This also impacts on the ability for both government and our members to effectively identify outcomes of policy changes for tamariki, whānau and communities. Extending the term of government is one driver for a more sustainable approach to serving our most vulnerable, whilst also reducing the cost of campaigning and elections due to this occurring less frequently.

Recommendation 5: We suggest that the term of government be extended to four years.

6. Expand representation in government

NZCCSS supports lowering the electoral threshold from 5% to 4% to increase access to Parliament for minor parties. The current threshold results in the exclusion of minor parties and the perspectives they bring to Parliamentary debate and decisions despite having gained political support from voters. It also leads to increased support for major parties, either through the exclusion of minor parties, or in voters transferring their vote from a minor party to a major party due to the perception that a minor party won't reach the 5% threshold. We believe a 4% threshold would deliver a fairer electoral system.

With regards to individual candidates, we suggest that candidates should be living in New Zealand for a specified period prior to being able to stand for candidacy.

Recommendation 6: We suggest that the electoral threshold be lowered from 5% to 4%.

Tohutoro | References

Fa'aoso, A. (2022, July 22) Demand for lowered voting age reinforced at Youth Parliament '22. RNZ. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/the-house/audio/2018850483/demand-for-lowered-voting-age-reinforced-at-youth-parliament-22>

Ministry of Justice. (2019) *Regulatory Impact Statement: Prisoner voting*. <https://www.treasury.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2020-02/ria-justice-prtv-feb20.pdf>

Oosterhoff, B., Wray-Lake, L., & Hart, D. (2022). Reconsidering the Minimum Voting Age in the United States. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 17(2), 442–451. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691621994221>