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THE MĀORI ELECTORAL OPTION

How can trends in roll choices be explained?

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Abstract

The Māori Electoral Option is a period of 4 months, every 5 years, when Māori electors can choose whether to be on the Māori or the General Electoral Roll. The outcome of the Māori Electoral Option is a key factor in determining the number of Māori seats in the New Zealand Parliament. The Electoral Commission estimates that approximately 6,000 Māori voters each year request to change electoral roll, but in 2017 over 19,000 voters applied to change. Why were so many more Māori wanting to change and why did they not know they could only change during the Māori Electoral Option held every 5 years? The following year, the 2018 Māori Electoral Option saw the first net increase of Māori changing to the general roll since 1996. This article uses data gathered from the results of Māori Electoral Options 1991–2018, an anonymous survey, and evaluations of Māori Electoral Option campaigns to consider how the shifting trends in roll choices might be explained.

Keywords

Māori Electoral Option, Māori seats, New Zealand politics

Introduction

Analysis of the Māori Electoral Option is inextricably linked to a consideration of the Māori seats in the New Zealand Parliament. The outcome of the Māori Electoral Option is a key factor in determining the number of Māori seats, and the Māori seats are an expression of the rights guaranteed for Māori in Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

In the 2018 Māori Electoral Option, the percentage of Māori on the Māori Electoral Roll remained a majority at 52.4% (Electoral Commission, 2018c, p. 3). However, there was a net increase of Māori changing from the Māori Electoral Roll to the General Electoral Roll. This increase raises a number of questions about how Māori view the different electoral rolls and their significance. In 1986, the Royal Commission on the Electoral System stated that "the Māori seats have . . . come to be regarded by Māori as an important concession to, and the principal expression of, their constitutional position under the Treaty of Waitangi" (p. 86). The 2013 Constitutional Advisory Panel (2013) found "significant support among Māori for the retention of Māori seats" (p. 40). But a net increase to the General Electoral Roll raises the question of whether the Māori Electoral Roll and the Māori seats are still the principal expression of the constitutional position. Or is there an increased interest in the general roll for reasons other than a lack of commitment to a Māori constitutional position?

In this article, I explore some of the possible reasons behind the shifting trends. I have used data from three main sources: the results from

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Māori Electoral Options, the findings of a survey I conducted in 2019 asking people of Māori descent enrolled on the General Electoral Roll why they prefer the general roll, and evaluations of each Māori Electoral Option campaign. As this area of inquiry has yet to receive much in the way of scholarly attention, this article should be read as a broad, introductory, descriptive piece.

The Māori Electoral Option

The Māori Electoral Option is a period of 4 months, every 5 years, when electors of Māori descent can choose their preferred electoral roll. The number of Māori on the Māori Electoral Roll is in turn one of the key elements (alongside population) in the formula that calculates the Māori electoral population and therefore the number of Māori electorates/Māori seats in Parliament (Stats NZ, 2019).

After each Māori Electoral Option, the impact on each roll is calculated by adding the number of those who have transferred to the number of new enrolments. This provides a positive or negative result and is described as "the impact on the roll".

Māori have been able to choose their electoral roll since the Electoral Amendment Act 1975, but the number of seats has been set at four since 1867 irrespective of the number of people on the roll. When the option to change became available in 1975, there was a shift of Māori from the Māori roll to the general roll. At that time, part of the thinking appeared to be that the Māori seats were consistently dominated by Labour Party candidates and, therefore, Māori might be able to have more candidate options and impact if they were on the general roll and in marginal seats (Waitangi Tribunal, 1994, p. 8). Added to that perspective was the election in 1975 of two Māori candidates (Rex Austin and Ben Couch) for the first time to general seats, demonstrating that it was possible (Durie, 2005). In 1991, there were 126,723 Māori on the general roll and 87,562 on the Māori roll, and "72,965 Māori eligible to vote not on either roll" (Waitangi Tribunal, 1994, p. 8).

While the total number of seats in Parliament increased from 87 in 1975 to 99 in 1993, the Māori seats remained static at four. The difficulty therefore for Māori voters was that although they technically had a choice of roll, that choice could not translate into any greater political strength in Parliament because the number of Māori representatives did not proportionally increase. If the Māori seats are an expression of Māori tino rangatiratanga, as the Royal Commission on the Electoral System claimed, they had certainly become a "lacklustre expression" by 1993 (Waitangi Tribunal, 1994, p. 8). The exercise of tino rangatiratanga, Māori political strength and citizenship were effectively stifled because the choice of a Māori representative did not provide for the same rights or increased political influence as other representatives.

When the electoral system changed to mixed member proportional in 1993, it was accompanied by an amendment to the Electoral Act that enabled the number of Māori seats to increase with an increase in the Māori roll and for the Electoral Option to take place over a 2-month period. The 1994 Māori Electoral Option was then the first time that the Māori roll choice really mattered. An urgent claim was lodged with the Waitangi Tribunal by Hare Wakakaraka Puke on behalf of himself and supported by the National Māori Congress, New Zealand Māori Council and Māori Women's Welfare League. Given Crown Treaty obligations to protect Māori representation (Waitangi Tribunal, 1994), the claim asked whether adequate and independent time, planning and funding had been provided for the Māori Electoral Option to be held February to April 1994. The claimants to the Waitangi Tribunal rightly saw the opportunity presented by the newly shaped option for securing just and equitable political power for Māori and an enhanced expression of tino rangatiratanga.

The Waitangi Tribunal (1994) examined Treaty principles that applied in the case and found that:

> the Crown is under a Treaty obligation to actively protect Maori citizenship rights and, in particular, existing Maori rights to political representation conferred under the Electoral Act 1993. This duty of protection arises from the Treaty generally and in particular from the provisions of article 3. (p. 15)

The Tribunal qualified this finding by stating that in carrying out its obligations the Crown "is not required, in protecting Maori citizenship rights to political representation, to go beyond taking such action as is reasonable in the prevailing circumstances" (Waitangi Tribunal, 1994, p. 15).

In relation to funding, however, they found that the amount and types of services being provided for the Māori Electoral Option were "substantially less than is reasonably required . . . and is in breach of Treaty principles" (Waitangi Tribunal, 1994, p. 37). They found further "that if adequate funding is not provided by the Crown . . . Maori political rights conferred under the Electoral Act 1993 will not be effectively implemented and Maori will be seriously prejudicially affected"

(Waitangi Tribunal, 1994, p. 37). Funding for the Māori Electoral Option was increased and the learnings from the 1994 litigation have been commented on by the Electoral Commission in subsequent reports of Electoral Option results and campaigns.

Māori Electoral Option 2018

The 2018 Māori Electoral Option ran from April to August. Over 95% of Māori electors stayed on the electoral roll they were already on (Electoral Commission, 2018c). At the end of the option, 52.4% of Māori voters were on the Māori roll and 47.6% on the general roll (Electoral Commission, 2018c, p. 3). Of a total number of 472,249 Māori enrolled, 18,119 people changed rolls and there were 5,215 new enrolments. There was a net increase of 4,015 people on the general roll compared with 1,200 on the Māori roll (Electoral Commission, 2018c, p. 6). This was the first time since 1994 that there was a larger net increase to the general roll than the Māori roll.

The percentage of Māori on each electoral roll has remained relatively stable since 1997, when the previous dominance of the general roll from 1991 was reversed (no data is available from the Electoral Commission for other Māori Electoral Option results). Since the 2006 Māori Electoral Option, the percentage of Māori on the Māori roll has been declining and the percentage of Māori on the general roll has increased, as can be seen in Figure 1. A 6% decline in the percentage of Māori on the Māori roll is apparent.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the trend of the

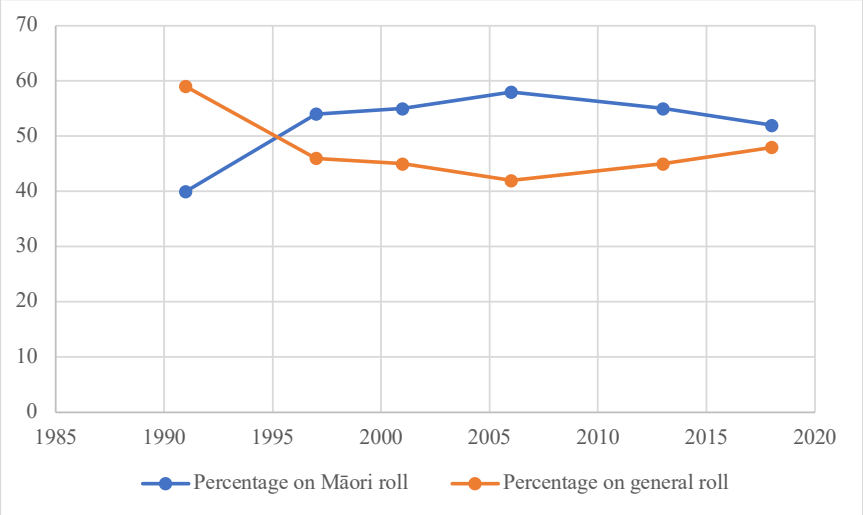

FIGURE 1 Percentage of Māori on each electoral roll

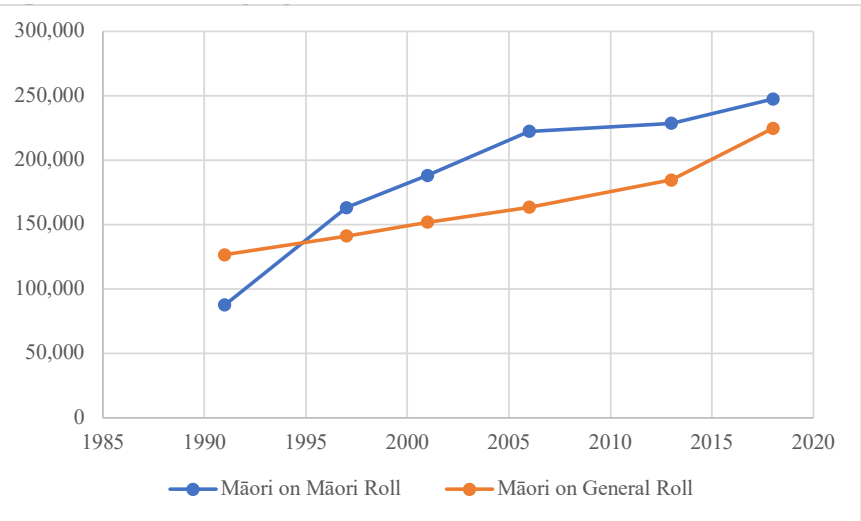

FIGURE 2 Number of people of Māori descent on electoral rolls

percentage of Māori on the Māori roll declining is less visible when examining the total number of Māori on the electoral rolls, as the overall number is increasing, strongly correlated with the increasing Māori population of voting age (Stats NZ, 2013).

The Electoral Commission only holds age breakdown data for the 2006, 2013 and 2018 Māori Electoral Options. Examination of the trends in these Māori Electoral Options across new enrolments, the impact of changes on rolls and age demographics illuminates a number of factors that are connected to the declining percentage of Māori on the Māori roll. The trend appears to be influenced by three key factors: (a) the declining percentage of new enrolments to the Māori roll, (b) the increasing percentage of 55–70-plus-year-old electors changing from the Māori roll to the general roll and (c) the declining percentage of Māori changing rolls. I will explore each of these in turn.

Declining percentage of new enrolments to the Māori roll

New enrolments are defined by the Electoral Commission (2018a) as "electors who have never been enrolled on the main roll before or who have previously been enrolled but are not currently on any roll (this excludes electors who are on the dormant rolls)". There continue to be more new enrolments to the Māori roll than to the general roll. However, from the 2001 Māori Electoral Option, the percentage of new enrolments opting for the Māori roll has declined steadily, while the percentage on the general roll has been relatively steady (see Figure 3). These new enrolments cannot be assumed to be 18–24-year-old electors. In the 2013 and 2018 Māori Electoral Options, the percentage of 18–24-year-old electors that changed rolls was higher on the Māori roll.

Increasing percentage of 55–70-plus-year-old electors changing from the Māori roll to the general roll

Over the different Māori Electoral Options, a reducing percentage of 18–29-year-old electors have been changing to the general roll. Alongside this, however, more 55–70-plus-year-old electors have been changing to the general roll in each Māori Electoral Option. In Figure 4, the movement across rolls is relatively steady and in some age ranges actually increasing on the Māori roll. However, the percentage increase apparent in similar age groups in Figure 5 is even greater, counteracting the movement from the general to the Māori roll.

The trend of movement to the general roll is most starkly apparent in the 70-plus-year-old category, with an increase from 4% in 2006 to 10% in 2018 (see Figure 6).

Percentage of Māori changing rolls declining

The percentage of enrolled Māori changing rolls is slowly declining, as shown in Figure 7. When combined with the previous two factors, this decline has a consequence for the percentage of electors on the Māori roll.

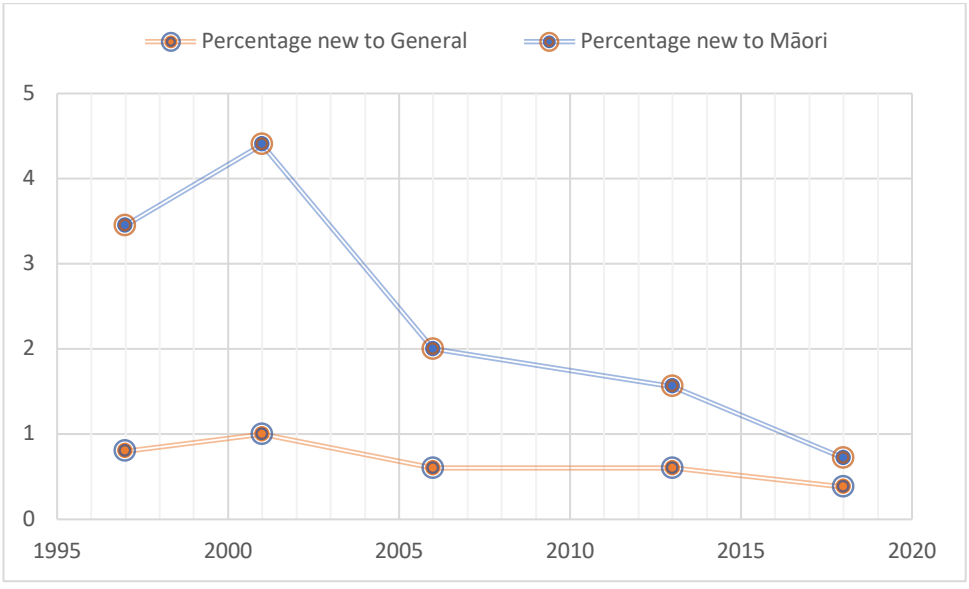

FIGURE 3 Percentage of Māori Electoral Option new enrolments to each roll

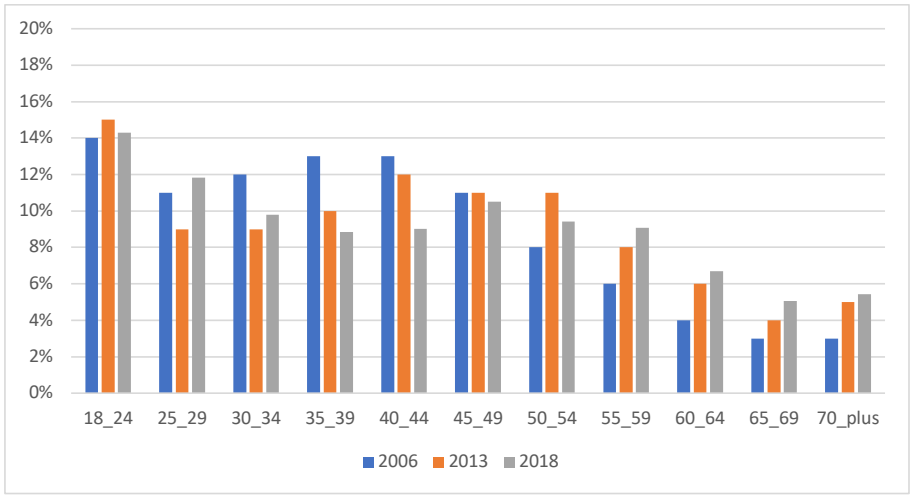

FIGURE 4 Age breakdown of electors changing in the Māori Electoral Option from general roll to Māori roll

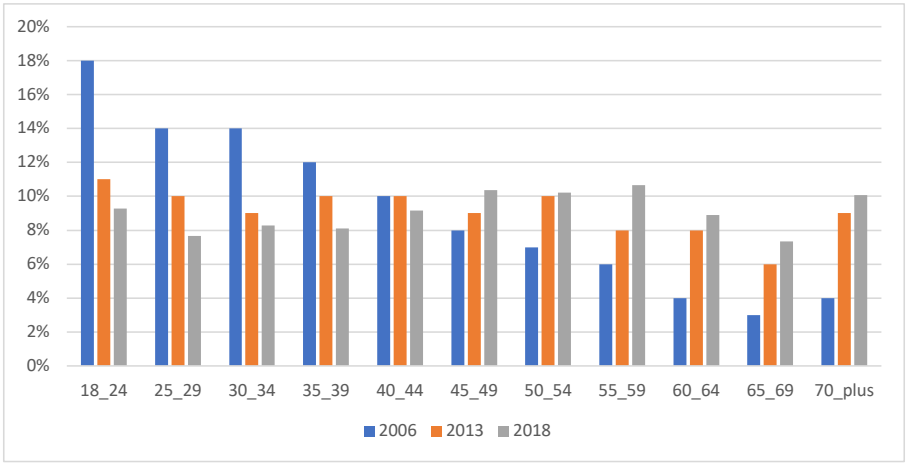

FIGURE 5 Age breakdown of electors changing in the Māori Electoral Option from Māori roll to general roll

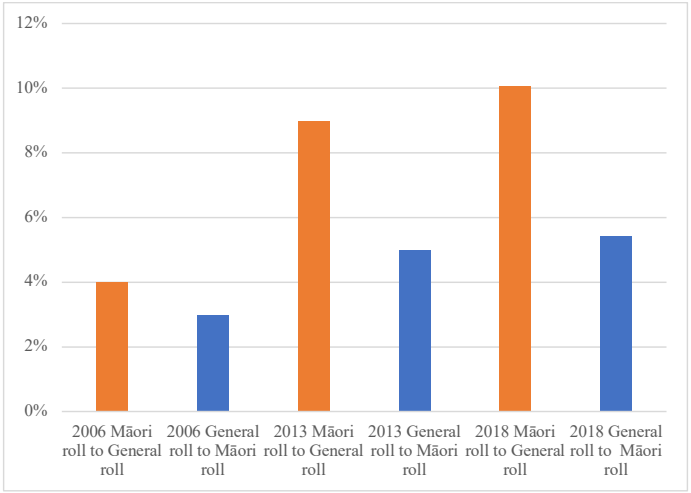

FIGURE 6 70-plus-year-old electors changing electoral roll

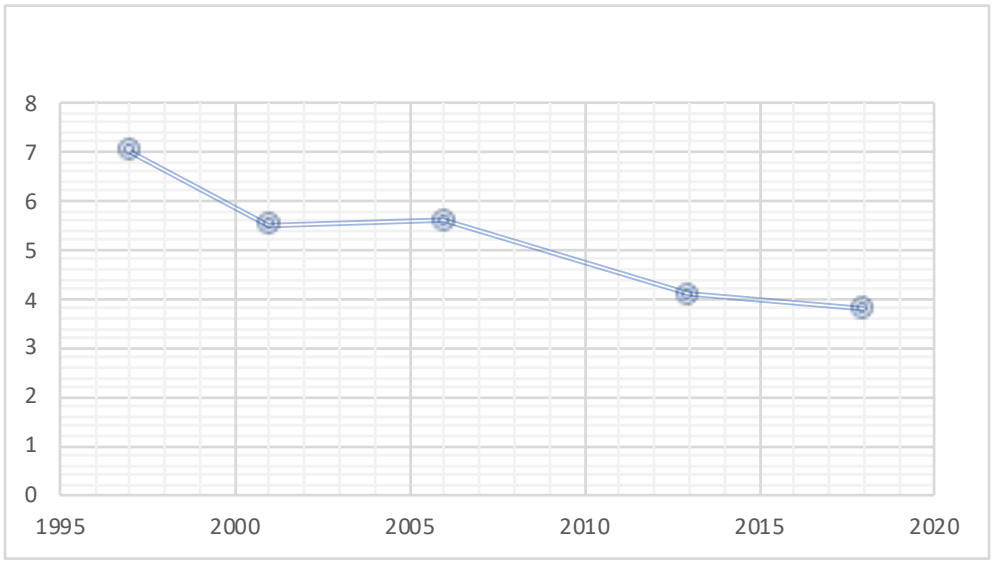

FIGURE 7 Percentage of enrolled Māori changing rolls

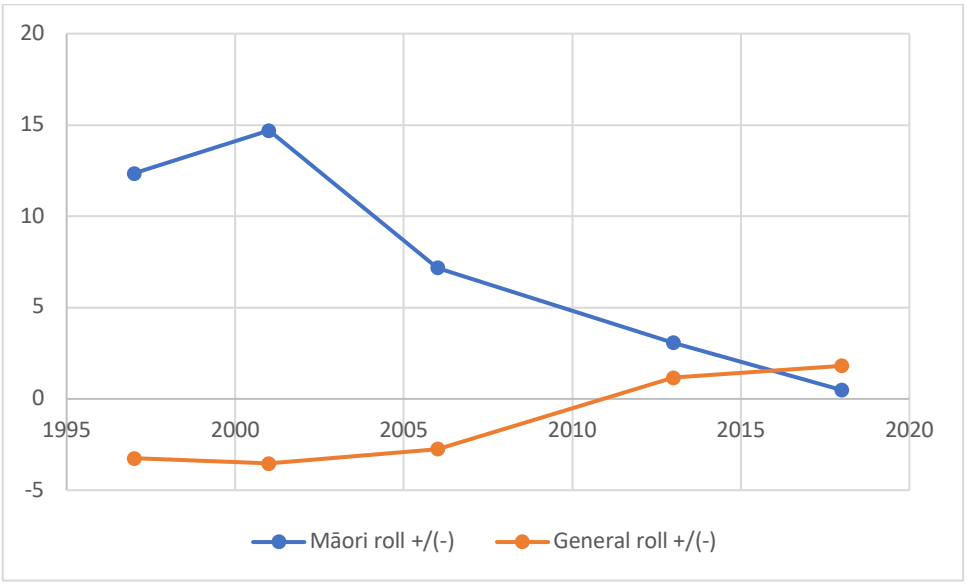

FIGURE 8 Percentage impact on each roll from each Māori Electoral Option

The percentage of Māori changing rolls during a Māori Electoral Option averages at around 5%. The percentage "impact" reveals a more marked change than is visible when comparing the impact by the number of people, as the percentage adjusts for the different roll sizes at the end of each Māori Electoral Option. In Figure 8, I have calculated the percentage impact on each roll from the number impact on the particular roll as a percentage (original number on the roll divided by number impact). While the percentage of Māori on the general roll has not gone above the percentage of Māori on the Māori roll, the trend indicates this is a strong possibility at the next Māori Electoral Option, in 2024.

Discussion of Māori Electoral Option results

Given the changing patterns of roll selection and their possible impacts, it is useful to consider some of the factors that might be influencing the pattern. With the Labour dominance in the Māori electorates, it is possible that those who would like to

vote for other political parties are changing rolls to have a greater choice. This does not fully explain the changing age groupings, however, or account for general electorates with high levels of Māori voters selecting Labour representatives, such as Manurewa. Given the large size of the Māori electorates, another possibility is that representatives are not able to build a sense of community across electorates, such as in Te Tai Tonga, where the representative must cater for the entire South Island and Wellington City. However, the fact that some candidates have won their seats over several decades might contradict that idea and appears to suggest that Māori representatives can have strong collective support across their electorates. With limited New Zealand history being taught in secondary schools, it is possible that the political significance and intent of the Māori Electoral Roll and electorates is no longer well understood by young Māori. But this does not provide a full explanation because new enrolments on to the Māori roll continue to be high.

Another issue might be the significant challenge for small and new political parties to establish themselves and provide wider candidate options, including in Māori electorates. Sustaining and resourcing a small political party is a huge challenge (Bargh, 2012). In the 2017 election year, the larger political parties received donations far in excess of the smaller parties. The National Party received $4,549,086.44, and the Labour Party $1,611,073.77. In contrast, the Māori Party received $388,860.60 and the Mana Party $2,708 (Electoral Commission, n.d.).

Donations and other funds enable party candidates to travel to locations across electorates, advertise through billboards, newspapers, TV and online, and conduct polling on voter preferences. Sustaining a political party focused largely on Māori issues, or with an overtly Māori identity, is even more difficult, since their appeal is perceived as primarily to a niche audience. One of the reasons the Mana Movement joined with the Internet Party was to appeal to a broader audience and gain access to financial resources ("Mana Confirms Election Year Deal", 2014).

Another possible reason for some of the changing patterns in roll choices is the position particular political parties take in opposing the Māori electorates. When New Zealand First won all five Māori seats in 1996, it demonstrated a significant shift in thinking among Māori communities (Durie, 2005). The Labour Party had held the Māori seats since 1943, and though other parties had stood candidates, the Labour hold was fairly entrenched. New Zealand First gave other political parties hope that it was possible to have properly contested Māori seats and to win. Before the 1999 election, however, those New Zealand First members in Māori electorates (except Tu Wylie) had all split from New Zealand First and joined other political parties. In 1999 New Zealand First candidates did contest the Māori seats, but Labour regained all of the (then) six electorates. In 2002 Labour won the then seven electorates. Only when the Māori Party won four of the seven seats in 2005 was there another disruption to the Labour hold on the seats.

After 1999 New Zealand First stated that they did not support the retention of the Māori seats and would not stand candidates in them again. Prior to the 2017 election, New Zealand First leader Winston Peters reiterated the view that "Māori don't need the Māori seats—they don't need any more tokenism" (as cited in Collins, 2017). This tactic, to show a lack of support by not standing candidates and in effect ignoring the Māori electorates, eventually had an impact on other political party policies, including the National Party.

In 2003 National Party leader Bill English announced that party policy was to abolish the Māori electorates (Geiringer, 2003, p. 240). Having stood candidates in the Māori electorates as recently as 2002, this policy contrived to lift National political party fortunes by exploiting growing racist attitudes towards Māori that rejected the idea that Māori have a constitutional identity and status separate from non-Māori (Geiringer, 2003). This view was subsequently inflated when Don Brash became leader of the National Party in October 2003. Brash was advised by media "spin doctors" to appeal to racist sentiments for political gain, which he infamously did in his carefully calculated, but in many places factually incorrect, "Orewa Speech" (Hager, 2006).

Why might Māori change to or enrol on the general roll?

In order to gather further information about the shifts across roll types, and to further understand what some of the motivating factors might be for Māori choosing the general roll, I conducted an anonymous survey of people of Māori descent on the General Electoral Roll between September and December 2019.

Methods

Of 1,000 surveys sent, I received 118 responses (11.7%). Twenty-three of 118 (19%) completed

their survey online. Fourteen respondents indicated they believed they were on the Māori Electoral Roll and one stated that they were not Māori. The 11.7% response rate is similar to other random mail surveys. In their survey on Māori financial attitudes, Houkamau, Sibley and Henare (2019) commented on their 7% response rate being low but in line with random mail surveys, which they argued are "particularly prone to very low response rates" (p. 148). Given the small sample size, this survey is not fully representative; however, there are insights to be derived from these results and I suggest lines of inquiry that can be followed up in future research.

The main aim of the survey was to determine why people chose to be on the General Electoral Roll. The two core questions of the survey were:

1. Why have you chosen the General Electoral Roll?
2. What would make you change to the Māori Electoral Roll?

For question 1, respondents had 15 statements and were asked to select a response from agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree or unsure. These statements included issues such as identity, skill distribution, Labour Party, tino rangatiratanga, electorate size, knowing someone, being related to someone and choice of candidates.

For the second major question of the survey, "What would make you change to the Māori roll?", respondents again had 15 statements for which to select agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree or unsure. The issues were similar, but phrased differently to the first question.

I received permission from the Electoral Commission to use names and addresses from the electronic electoral roll. This ensured that I had certainty the people I contacted, and those who responded, were recorded by the Electoral Commission as of Māori descent and on the General Electoral Roll. Names were selected randomly from across the 11 regional council areas in the North and South Islands and internationally. Each posted letter contained an information sheet, survey and small chocolate as a token of thanks for people taking part. Respondents could reply by post, using the enclosed reply envelope, or by scanning a QR code and completing the survey online using Qualtrics. Approval was received from the Victoria University of Wellington Ethics Committee for the survey.

Results

Eighty per cent of respondents agreed (agreed and somewhat agreed) that:

- "There is more choice of candidates on the general roll" and
- "Māori don't all think the same and it's good to have Māori on both electoral rolls".

Comments added to the responses indicated that there were several variations around the "more choice" response. For some it was more choice of people who they had some knowledge about: "Because I didn't have the choice to vote for people I wanted to, only Māori candidates who I have never heard of when on Māori roll." These also connected with comments about the greater amount of information available for general electorate candidates: "It's easier to vote on the general roll. I know more information about my local general roll hopeful. There is more information around about them."

For others it was that those on the general roll had a higher chance of being aligned to their values and views: "More candidates to better reflect my values and goals"; "I think the broader range of parties and candidates available to me on the general roll are more in line with my political preferences."

Others saw the general roll as presenting a greater chance of having influence:

> Because I wanted to have more of a say in the choosing of our government. When I started voting there was limited choice in the FPP [first past the post] system and only 2 parties to choose from. There is still limited choice with the Māori seats as they have traditionally been held by Labour/NZ First.

There were two places in the survey where the issue of the Māori electorates was queried. One was a response to the question "Why have you chosen the General Electoral Roll?" that stated "I don't think there should be a Māori roll." In answer, 56% disagreed with the statement and 9% somewhat disagreed. The question was asked again after another question about whether Māori should be able to change electoral roll at any time. Fifty-six per cent of respondents disagreed with the statement "There shouldn't be a Māori Electoral Roll", and 21.6% indicated they were neutral. Overall, the majority of respondents indicated support for the Māori roll, despite being on the general roll themselves. This suggests that the numbers of people on the general roll should not be used to

infer that those electors believe the Māori Electoral Roll should be abolished.

The second major question of the survey was "What would make you change to the Māori roll?" Here there was less consensus than in the responses to the first main question. The top three results were:

- 57% of respondents agreed they would change to the Māori Electoral Roll "To support more Māori in parliament".
- 55% said they would "If the electorates were smaller and the MPs could better represent me".
- 52.6% said they would shift "If candidates from lots of different political parties stood in Māori electorates".

The majority of respondents to the survey stated they do not vote in their iwi elections (70%). Of those aged 35–39 and 45–49, 100% stated they do not vote in iwi elections. It is difficult to ascertain whether these responses are particular to those who chose to reply to this survey, or whether there is a correlation between being on the general roll and a low level of engagement in iwi politics. While the survey did not ask specifically about iwi elections or ask people to identify which electoral roll they are on, the Stats NZ (2013) Te Kupenga survey reported that 89% of Māori adults said they knew their iwi and 62% of adults said they had been to their marae, but only 34% had done so in the previous 6 months.

Most respondents, 68%, indicated that they had not changed electoral rolls. This is a significantly lower percentage than is reported for Māori Electoral Options between 1997 and 2018, when an average of 95% of Māori remained on the same roll. It may indicate that those who chose to complete the survey already had an above-average interest, including in changing rolls. Of those 21% of respondents who said they had changed electoral roll, 44% said they had changed more than once, and 21% said they had done so in the 2018 Māori Electoral Option.

While the results of this survey are limited by the small sample size, they suggest that despite the argument that the Māori Electoral Option is a litmus test or referendum of Māori support for the Māori electorates (Geiringer, 2003), this may not be the case. Respondents demonstrated ongoing support for Māori electorates and Māori representation, but also a desire for representation in other forms, including people of Māori descent in the general electorates. The limited choice of candidates in the Māori electorates that results from few political parties standing candidates is clearly a frustration that is driving Māori electors to the general roll. Possibly connected to this is a sense that, with fewer parties standing candidates, there is less information about candidates. While not statistically significant, the comments made about general seats being more powerful in working to form a government connect back to the Labour dominance of the Māori electorates. If the seats become more marginal and the contests are close, then it is likely that Māori electorate MPs will have greater leverage within their own caucus and be able to argue they needed more obvious "wins" or benefits through the Budget and policy

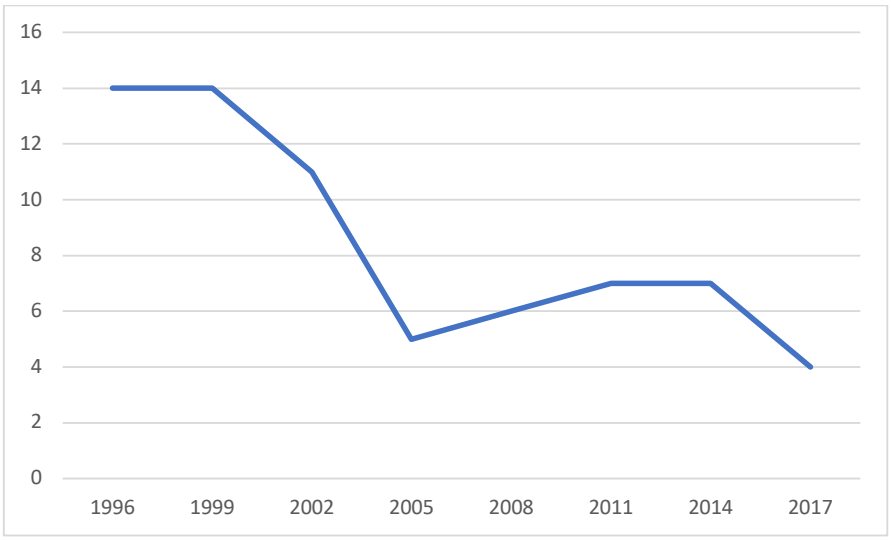

FIGURE 9 Number of political parties standing candidates in Māori electorates

for their electorates. Frustrations about the size of electorates, which make it difficult for electors to feel well represented, highlight an issue that has been raised by Māori electorate MPs themselves and is clearly still a challenge ("No Political Will", 2013). Also apparent in the results is a section of Māori who feel their upbringing aligns more closely to a non-Māori world and who feel more comfortable in a general electorate with mostly non-Māori candidates representing a variety of communities.

The status of the Māori electorates

Respondents to the anonymous survey concerned about the limited choice of electorate candidates on the Māori roll have a point. Figure 9 shows the numbers of political parties standing candidates in Māori electorates between 1996 and 2017 general elections. The overall trend is declining and in some specific electorates, such as Waiariki and Hauraki-Waikato, there were only two political parties standing candidates in 2017.

Insights on Māori choices from Māori Electoral Option campaigns

Trying to gather further information into the trends of Māori electoral choices across rolls, I asked whether the formal evaluations of the Māori Electoral Option campaigns provide any insights into what Māori know about choosing an electoral roll and the consequences of their choices. Given the wide variation of tactics and strategies across campaigns over the years, I have focused primarily on recurring themes. There are two areas to examine—the way the campaigns were run and what the post-campaign evaluations might tell us about the effectiveness of the campaigns to increase Māori knowledge and understanding of electoral roll choice.

How the campaigns were run

It is useful to note initially that the agencies administering the Māori Electoral Option have changed over the years. The Electoral Commission/Electoral Enrolment Centre administered the 2006 and 2001 options and the Ministry of Justice provided reports on both those options. The new Electoral Commission, established in 2010 as an independent Crown entity, has administered all options since then.

In 2018 the Electoral Commission (2018c) used a "nationwide advertising campaign . . . including television, radio, newspaper, digital and out of home, and a social media campaign including videos and posts by social influencers" (p. 3). They worked alongside community organisations and community engagement advisers, and many of these were Māori.

The Electoral Commission campaign was paralleled by a Te Puni Kōkiri campaign, #FFSChoose. The Te Puni Kōkiri campaign focused exclusively on youth (18–29 years) and primarily used social media. The rationale behind focusing on this specific group was that the campaign aimed to leverage the 2017 #FFSVote (For Future's Sake Vote) campaign, which had aimed to encourage young Māori to vote in the general election. No formal evaluation was ever completed of that campaign, so it is difficult to know whether it was a success or not.

Post-campaign evaluations

The evaluations of the 2001, 2006, 2013 and 2018 Māori Electoral Option campaigns have tended to declare them all "successful" and "effective" (Ministry of Justice, 2006, p. 1) or a "good job" (Kalafatelis et al., 2013, p. 15). The post-option research tends to investigate which forms of media and communication receive the most attention, and which people and language electors respond to. In general, television continues to play a significant role, alongside radio, social media and websites. The use of te reo Māori and Māori cultural practices was reportedly viewed positively (LITMUS, 2019, p. 20). Several evaluations also note the benefit of "face to face engagement" in "achieving understanding of the more complex messages, such as the relationship between the Māori roll and the number of Māori seats" (Electoral Commission, 2018c, p. 30). Slightly different evaluation measures have been used across options, which makes it difficult to track the results over time; however, there are a number of recurring types of results.

The campaign evaluation reports tend to note whether the campaign messages can be recalled by survey respondents; in 2018, this was 53% unprompted (Electoral Commission, 2018c, p. 3). An evaluation of the Electoral Commission's campaign conducted by KANTAR TNZ (2018a) assessed whether the Commission's communications had raised awareness and understanding about and engagement in the 2018 Māori Electoral Option among Māori (p. 3). They concluded that the "MEO advertising awareness is high at 53% [of those they surveyed], with television being the highest recalled media channel" (KANTAR TNZ, 2018a, p. 4).

In 2001 post-option research, 74% of respondents indicated that they "did not know when the Māori Electoral Option was being held" (Ministry

of Justice, 2001, p. 4). The Ministry of Justice (2001) noted this "may reflect confusion about the question (i.e. whether it referred to the current or next Māori Electoral Option)" (p. 4). In 2006, 68% of those interviewed post-option knew that an elector can only change roll type during the Option period (Ministry of Justice, 2006, p. 4) but only 43% knew that "the Option is generally held once every 5 years" (Ministry of Justice, 2006, p. 4). Prior to the 2018 campaign "86% of survey respondents were unsure or wrong about when a person of Māori descent can change roll type" (Electoral Commission, 2018c, p. 32). The Commission did not note whether that percentage had changed after the campaign; however, in the KANTAR TNZ (2018a) report it stated:

> awareness of only voting for a person standing in a Māori electorate if they are on the Māori roll has decreased, as did the proportion stating that Māori can change rolls. The indication of when to change remains high, with most Māori thinking they can change roll types after receiving a pack in the mail. (p. 5)

The 1997 report on the 1994 Māori Electoral Option campaign provides grim reading of levels of understanding of the significance of the Māori Electoral Option. It stated that "only 34%" of Māori interviewed for the post-campaign correctly noted that it had an impact on the number of Māori seats in Parliament (Kalafatelis & Allan, 1997, p. 6). In 2006 the post-option research stated that "78% of those interviewed knew that the number of Māori on the Māori roll helps to decide the number of Māori electorates" (Ministry of Justice, 2006, p. 4). In 2018, however, this aspect had become one of the "the least understood aspects" (KANTAR TNZ, 2018a, p. 5).

In 2001 evaluation research showed that at the conclusion of the option, 72% were aware of how to change roll types (Ministry of Justice, 2001, p. 3). Worryingly, despite the campaigns, ongoing confusion persists about the Māori electorates, their purpose and the consequences of changes to the roll sizes. In 2018 the Commission stated that "unprompted awareness of key elements of the electoral system such as understanding of the two roll types remains low" (Electoral Commission, 2018c, p. 32).

Given the importance of the outcome of the Māori Electoral Option, the conduct and evaluations of campaigns pose worrying questions. If the campaigns to raise awareness and educate Māori electors about their choices are ineffective, then it is not clear whether Māori electors are making fully *informed* choices about which electoral roll to be on. The timing and structure of the Māori Electoral Option also appears to add to elector confusion.

Issues with the Māori Electoral Option

Several aspects of the Māori Electoral Option have been raised by the Electoral Commission as requiring government attention. The first is, as they have indicated in several reports, that the Māori Electoral Option is not held at an optimal time. The option was set up to sit alongside the Census, but as the Electoral Commission has pointed out, the option should either be timed around general elections, when people's awareness of politics is at its highest, the choice is relevant and the Commission is running electoral update campaigns, or Māori should simply be allowed to change electoral roll at any time. At present, the Commission states, "The timing of it is not intuitive for Māori voters" (Electoral Commission, 2018c, p. 32).

In reports dating back to 2011, the Electoral Commission (2012) has recommended changes to the Māori Electoral Option to enable Māori to "change roll types once each electoral cycle at a time of their choosing" (p. 6). In the *Report of the Electoral Commission on the 2017 General Election* (Electoral Commission, 2018b) and the *Report of the Electoral Commission on the 2018 Māori Electoral Option* (Electoral Commission, 2018c), the Electoral Commission recommended that Māori be able to change electoral roll at any time. In 2017, 19,000 people applied to change roll type (Electoral Commission, 2018b), but were not able to, and the Electoral Commission (2018c) noted that "electors find this frustrating" (p. 32). An ability to change at any time, they argue, would also enable the funding for the Māori Electoral Option to be redirected into supporting Māori political participation more broadly (Electoral Commission, 2018c, p. 32).

The politics of "political neutrality"

The dilemma for the Electoral Commission is how to communicate messages about the Māori electorates and maintain a balance with the types of information communicated. For several options, the campaign material states an ambition to be "politically neutral" (Ministry of Justice, 2001, p. 19; 2006, p. 3).

The information that the Electoral Commission and Te Puni Kōkiri sought to provide in 2018 was "politically neutral", which may have resulted in

inadvertently supporting the status quo. It is telling that in the post-campaign report, KANTAR TNZ (2018a) noted that "awareness of many MEO [Māori Electoral Option] voting and roll regulations have fallen this wave, some significantly so" (p. 5). Two crucial details of the option that were "the least understood aspects" were:

- If you're on the general roll you cannot vote for a candidate in a Māori electorate
- If the number of people on the Māori roll increases, the number of Māori electorates will increase. (KANTAR TNZ, 2018a, p. 5)

The second of these two pieces of information is particularly crucial and could be pivotal in motivating people to be on the Māori roll if they knew it would make a difference to the numbers of Māori representatives in Parliament—where numbers can equate to political strength.

An evaluation of the Te Puni Kōkiri 2018 Māori Electoral Option campaign by LITMUS (2019) highlights the challenge faced by Te Puni Kōkiri "to deliver politically neutral information about the MEO. Te Puni Kōkiri could not advocate one choice over another in campaign material" (p. 19). Echoing the comments I have made above, the LITMUS report notes "information about how choosing to be on the General roll affects the number of Māori seats in parliament is difficult to explain in a politically neutral way" (p. 19). Stakeholders that LITMUS interviewed concluded "the context [is] overly risk-averse" (p. 19).

Racism

There are also external factors affecting messages to Māori over which Te Puni Kōkiri and the Electoral Commission have no control. Māori are constantly receiving micro-messages from dominant society about Māori identity and Māori political issues and rights, and this has an impact on Māori people and decisions they make (Came & McCreanor, 2015). In local government elections there is often "unvarnished bigotry" (Stephens, 2019, p. 189) directed at Māori that is vocal and vicious. The LITMUS (2019) research for Te Puni Kōkiri noted that "#FFSChoose was open to racist and negative engagement", which required that mitigation measures be implemented (p. 21). Measures included Te Puni Kōkiri and GSL Promotus regulating "negative, particularly racist commentary" (LITMUS, 2019, p. 13). They noted that:

> some Facebook users viewed the MEO and Māori seats as negative discrimination and actively tried to disrupt online discussions. During the first half of the #FFSChoose campaign a sizable portion of the online commentary was negative. Negative commentary included racist comments about Māori and baiting users online with the intent of provoking and upsetting those in favour of the MEO. (LITMUS, 2019, p. 13)

The Electoral Commission in its evaluation reports has never raised racism against Māori, against Māori representation and against the Māori Electoral Option as an issue.

The timing and structure of the Māori Electoral Option itself appears to have an impact on Māori elector roll choices in complex and possibly hidden ways. What is unclear is the extent to which these factors have an influence on Māori elector choices, and much more research is need to evaluate this.

Conclusion

This article sought to explain the changing trends that are apparent in the roll choices of Māori voters. Data has been used from Māori Electoral Options, an anonymous survey and evaluations of Māori Electoral Option Campaigns to try to explain some of the trends.

It is clear that there is strong Māori support for the Māori seats but that confusion remains about the significance of the Māori Electoral Option and its link to the number of Māori seats. Successive awareness-raising campaigns appear to be too few and far between to be building deeper knowledge and understanding. The Māori Electoral Option itself, with its timing every 5 years and over a 4-month period, also appears to contribute to general confusion for Māori electors.

Much more research is needed on this complex topic, given its importance to Māori and New Zealand's constitutional arrangements. In particular, the idea of the Māori Electoral Option acting as a litmus test or referendum of Māori support for the Māori electorates (Geiringer, 2003) or, as the Constitutional Advisory Panel (2013) articulated, the Māori Electoral Option being the "self-regulating" mechanism by which Māori can determine whether or not the Māori seats should continue needs to be carefully and critically examined (p. 40). What would the consequences be if more than 50% of Māori chose to be enrolled on the General Electoral Roll? Would parliamentarians assume Māori no longer wanted the Māori seats and abolish them? I suggest that equating the choice of electoral roll over a 4-month period with approval in itself of the Māori seats may be unhelpful. There are simply too many factors that

could cause Māori to change or not change rolls during a 4-month period that can be completely unrelated to whether people support one electoral roll over another.

Criticism of the Māori seats is regularly deployed by politicians for political expediency. Such behaviour makes it difficult to openly discuss any issues that there may be with the Māori seats and the Māori Electoral Option in order to improve their function and enhance rather than thwart Māori citizenship.

The Royal Commission on the Electoral System (1986) concluded their chapter on Māori representation by noting that the special constitutional standing of Māori deriving from the Treaty of Waitangi needed to be addressed to ensure that Māori rights were constitutionally recognised, including through a just and equitable share of political power (p. 110).

Glossary

iwi	tribal kin group
marae	tribal meeting grounds
te reo Māori	the Māori language
tino rangatiratanga	self-determination

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