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Story: Political parties 2004

Curtin & Miller, 2015

Page 6. Small parties under MMP

Parties gained legal standing with the passing of the Electoral Act 1993. They were an integral part of the new mixed-member proportional (MMP) new electoral system, first used in the 1996 election. Suddenly, any political party that won more than 5% of the vote or an electorate seat was represented in Parliament. Coalitions or support arrangements between large and small parties became the norm, with a post-election period of negotiation before a governing group was announced.

It only takes two ticks

Under MMP each voter has two votes: one for an electorate candidate and one for a political party. This second 'party vote' determines the overall composition of the House of Representatives and, once deals have been done between parties that hold the balance of power, the choice of government.

The Electoral (Integrity) Amendment Act 2001 and the Electoral Finance Act 2007 directly affected the management of parties. The Electoral (Integrity) Amendment Act aimed to stop 'party-hopping' (preventing MPs elected when members of one party joining a different party once in Parliament), and expired two years after being passed. The Electoral Finance Act limited the amount that could be donated to parties anonymously and spent on third-party campaigns. It was repealed in 2009.

Coalitions

Small parties have not prospered as coalition partners with either National or Labour governments. The first coalition, of National and New Zealand First, collapsed prematurely in 1998 when Winston Peters was sacked from cabinet. Subsequently eight New Zealand First MPs defected to National, allowing it to govern without Winston Peters. The Alliance also imploded before the end of its three-year term (1999–2002) as a coalition partner with Labour. Since this time, small parties have tended to avoid formal coalition arrangements, working instead as support parties on budget and other specifically negotiated issues, while still retaining a degree of independence.

Since the introduction of proportional representation in 1996 eight different small parties have gained parliamentary representation in addition to the two major parties. These were ACT, UnitedFuture, Greens, Mana, Māori, New Zealand First, Progressive and the Alliance.

Māori and Mana

The Māori Party was formed in 2004 in protest at Labour's decision to pass the Foreshore and Seabed Act. In the view of the party's founding leaders, Tariana Turia and Pita Sharples, the new legislation violated Māori customary title over the country's coastline. At the 2005 general election the Māori Party won four of Parliament's seven Māori seats, and following the 2008 and 2011 elections Turia and Sharples became ministers in John Key's minority National government. T[redacted] retired from Parliament at the 2014 election and the Māori Party only won one Māori seat (Waiariki), the rest going to Labour.

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As a result of personal and political differences, Māori Party MP Hone Harawira left to form the Mana Party in 2011. The party sought to represent the interests of Māori and the poor generally. Its leadership group included Pākehā political activists. In the 2011 general election Hone Harawira won Te Tai Tokerau seat for Mana and became its sole MP. In the lead-up to the 2014 election Mana entered into an alliance with the Internet Party. Harawira lost the seat to Kelvin Davis in 2014; Mana was out of Parliament and the alliance was dissolved.

ACT

ACT (a party that appealed to voters of the far right) was formed in 1993 as the Association of Consumers and Taxpayers, by former Labour cabinet minister Roger Douglas and former National cabinet minister Derek Quigley. The party proper began in 1994. ACT won eight seats at its first election in 1996 but remained in opposition for the next 12 years. When the National Party formed a government in 2008, ACT's leader and deputy leader were offered ministerial posts. However, during this parliamentary term the party experienced internal conflict and its political fortunes declined – after the 2011 and 2014 elections ACT had only one MP.

Minor parties into the 21st century

Of all the minor parties only the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand has consistently reached the required 5% party vote threshold since 1999, despite the presence in Parliament of up to five or six small parties at any one time. Jim Anderton's Progressive Party (reinvented after the Alliance split in 2002) was represented solely on the basis of Anderton's electorate seat, and the same has generally been true for Peter Dunne's UnitedFuture Party. Parties such as this are unlikely to survive once their leader's electorate seats are lost – after Jim Anderton retired from Parliament at the 2011 election, the Progressive Party did not contest that election and was wound up the following year.

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