

POLITICS (/NEWS/POLITICAL)

Electoral system review recommends voting age lowered to 16, party threshold to 3.5%

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A review is calling for big changes to New Zealand's electoral system. Photo: NZ ELECTORAL COMMISSION

A sweeping review into the country's electoral system is recommending the voting age be lowered to 16, a 3.5 per cent party threshold, and a public referendum on a longer Parliamentary term.

An independent panel of experts has been considering public submissions (<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/474963/independent-electoral-review-seeks-public-views-on-changes>) on nearly every aspect of electoral law, commissioned by former Justice Minister Kris Faafoi in May last year.

After 58 public meetings and more than 1700 submissions it is now reporting a swathe of draft recommendations to make electoral laws 'fairer, clearer and more accessible'.

"There have been piecemeal changes to electoral law over many years, including some recently, but this review is an opportunity to step back and look at the bigger picture," panel chair Deborah Hart said.

The draft recommendations include:

- Lowering the voting age for general elections to 16 and extend overseas voting rules
- Extending voting rights to all prisoners, not just those sentenced to less than a three-year jail term
- Holding a referendum on extending the Parliamentary term from three to four years
- Lowering the party vote threshold from 5 to 3.5 per cent and abolishing the coat-tail rule
- Restricting political donations to registered voters, rather than organisations, and capping them at \$30,000 to each party and its candidates per electoral cycle while reducing the amount that can be anonymously donated
- Rewriting the Electoral Act to modernise its language (e.g. eliminating references to faxes)
- Requiring the Electoral Commission to give effect to the Treaty of Waitangi.

The interim report will undergo a second round of public consultation until 17 July before the panel hands the final copy to the government at the end of November.

Contest of ideas not cash

Panel chairwoman Deborah Hart said many submitters were uneasy about the size of political donations and the idea donors might be buying influence.

Under the panel's recommendations the maximum that could be donated to a party and candidate would be \$30,000.

Hart disagreed that was a small amount in contrast to the size of donations allowed at present.

"For most New Zealanders they would think that's a lot of money ... and really people are saying they want a contest of ideas, not a contest of cash."

Hart said the current system of having a party winning one seat and bringing in other MPs on their coat-tails was unfair.

"We did hear a lot about that - quite a lot of unease about that."

It penalised other small parties who failed to win a seat or reach the 5 percent threshold but could attract a higher total of votes overall than a successful rival.

The panel believed a 3.5 percent threshold would be fairer but still wanted to hear more public feedback.

"We want to find a way to ensure that smaller parties can get into Parliament at the right level of votes and 3.5 percent is still quite a high bar."

It would require a party to receive around 100,000 votes.

The review was an opportunity to step back and look at the bigger picture, Hart said.

She was not worried if politicians did not want to act with any urgency. The panel's job was to make the electoral system "fairer, clearer and more accessible so as many people as possible can take part" and she was confident any government would want to understand what New Zealanders wanted from the system.

If some of the recommendations were to proceed, including lowering the voting age to 16, they would require a 75 percent majority in Parliament or a referendum.

Hart did not believe that was a problem.

"When you're talking about electoral reform you do want broad support. You don't want electoral reform to become a political football."

Submissions seemed to be evenly split on the four-year Parliamentary term with some arguing three years goes too quickly and there was insufficient time to make robust laws and policy while other submitters were keen on the idea of holding politicians to account.

It was time for New Zealanders to receive a well-resourced education campaign on the topic so they could make up their minds and cast a vote in the referendum.

Time to get rid of 'shenanigans'

Panel member and University of Otago law professor Andrew Geddis agreed people were nervous over political donations totalling hundreds of thousands of dollars being made under the current system and what that might be buying.

There was concern over the lack of equality, prof Geddis said, with the potential for one large donor to have a huge input into a party or an election campaign in contrast to the ordinary voter.

"We've got a system of one person one vote but we don't have a system of one person one funding model and so we think there ought to be a cap on how much individuals can give to a party and a candidate combined."

A limit of \$30,000 in an electoral cycle would take that "really really big money" out of the funding money and encourage smaller amounts from a greater number of people.

There could be tax credits for small donations and as well there would be some state funding for every party to make up for any shortfall to ensure parties still had money to spend.

Prof Geddis was also concerned recent court cases had revealed how donors gave money through trusts and companies and could then split their donations which remained secret.

"So we think all those shenanigans should be just got rid of and individuals should be the only ones who get to give money ... and try to get more and more people actually giving money to parties to spread the financing to make for a more egalitarian and fairer, more open electoral system."

People can submit here (<https://electoralreview.govt.nz/>).



Deborah Hart Photo: