

## Page 1. First voting rights, 1852

New Zealand's first parliamentary election was held in 1853. Like most aspects of New Zealand's political system, the right to vote (also called the electoral franchise or suffrage) reflected British tradition. Although the colony's franchise was liberal for its time, not everyone could vote. Women, most Māori men and a minority of European men were excluded.

The right to vote was extended to all Māori men in 1867 and to all European men in 1879. Then in 1893 New Zealand famously led the world by giving women the right to vote. Four decades on from its first election, New Zealand was probably the most democratic country in the world.

### The 1850s franchise

The New Zealand Constitution Act, passed by the British Parliament in 1852, established a system of government for the colony. This act also set the rules for voting in New Zealand's first parliamentary and provincial elections, which took place in 1853. But not everyone was able to participate. As in Britain at this time, voting was not seen as an individual right of citizenship, but as a 'privilege' or 'trust' that should be exercised by some on behalf of others.

In keeping with British tradition, the right to vote was defined by:

- sex (voters had to be male)
- age (they had to be at least 21 years old)
- nationality (they had to be British subjects)
- property (they had to possess property of a certain value).

### The property qualification

The link between suffrage and property did not mean that only wealthy landowners could vote. Men could qualify in three ways:

- as freeholders (property owners), who owned land worth £50 or more
- as leaseholders, who held a lease on land worth at least £10 per year
- as householders, who lived in a house with an annual rental value of £10 (in a town) or £5 (in the country).

Householders could only vote in the electoral district in which they lived, but freeholders and leaseholders could register and vote in any electorate in which they held land. This meant that some electors could vote in half a dozen seats. Plural voting, as it was known, was common in the 1850s and survived until 1889. Electors had to appear in person to vote in each electorate, but until 1881 there was no single election day – voting in different electorates was usually held on different days.

### liberal franchise?

New Zealand's franchise was considered generous at the time. Attorney-General William Swainson thought it 'the liberal that has ever been granted to a British colony.'<sup>1</sup> Canterbury politician James FitzGerald agreed that 'hardly any man who cannot get a vote in New Zealand', as long as he was 'not of the pauper or criminal

Acquiring property was one of most migrants' main ambitions, and labourers could earn £40–£60 a year in New Zealand. As a result, probably three-quarters of the adult European males in the colony were eligible to vote. This was far more than in 1850s England (where about one in five men could vote) or Scotland (one in eight).

## Excluded from voting

Among those excluded from voting were 'aliens' (non-British subjects), inmates of prisons and asylums, very recent immigrants (voters had to live in an electorate for at least six months before enrolling) and transient workers such as agricultural labourers, bushmen and seafarers, who seldom possessed property.

## Māori voting rights

Another significant group was disadvantaged by the 1852 franchise: Māori. The right to vote was not, in theory, defined by race. Māori were British subjects and many could have qualified as rural householders. Around 100 Māori (mostly tribal leaders who owned houses in or near European settlements) did register and vote in the 1853 election, but wider participation was discouraged.

Māori could not qualify through possession of communal land – and most Māori land was owned communally – only through ownership of land in individual title granted by the Crown. Most settlers welcomed this limitation, believing that Māori (like ill-educated European farm labourers) were not yet capable of exercising such an important responsibility.

### Footnotes:

1. William Swainson, *New Zealand and its colonization*. London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1859, p. 291.
2. James FitzGerald, *The representation of New Zealand*. Christchurch: The Press, 1864, pp. 9, 21.
3. Samuel Butler, *A first year in Canterbury settlement, with other early essays*. London: Cape, 1923, p. 129.

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