

Antipodean Electoral Incentives: The pork barrel and New Zealand's MMP electoral rule

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Abstract:

Proportional Representation (PR) and First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral systems produce different incentives for elected Members of Parliament; however, distinguishing country effects from electoral system effects in studying these incentives often proves difficult. Moreover, whether differences in government spending patterns under PR are due to the workings of coalition politics post a PR election (Persson and Tabellini, 2003) or to differential incentives facing individual representatives elected under the two systems (Milesi-Ferretti et al, 2002) remains ambiguous. Stratmann and Baur (2002) examine the German Bundestag, where MPs are elected under both mechanisms, and find that MPs representing electoral districts are far more heavily represented on committees that facilitate geographic redistribution while those elected via party lists choose committees that allow them to target benefits to demographic groups supporting their parties. New Zealand recently revised its electoral system to follow the German Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) model. We find that the committee choices of New Zealand MPs elected under the different mechanisms follow the pattern found by Stratmann and Baur.

1. Introduction

Electoral rules matter, influencing party structure (Duverger, 1954), policy outcomes (Persson and Tabellini, 2003), government durability, and voter strategies.¹ The effect of electoral rules on the behaviour of individual elected representatives, by comparison, is far less studied. Milesi-Ferretti et. al. (2002) develop and test a model predicting that legislators elected via proportional representation (PR) systems will have incentives to channel funds through demographically-based transfer programs while those elected via plurality systems will instead target geographically-based spending programs. While they find that greater proportionality corresponds with larger transfer programs and less geographically-based spending, it remains unclear whether this is due to incentives facing representatives or the workings of coalition politics and incentives within cabinet. Persson and Tabellini develop and test a model suggesting that post-election coalition negotiations cause differences in spending outcomes, though Acemoglu (2005) raises doubts about the causal structure. If the choice of electoral rule is based on factors correlated with preferences over transfer programs, country effects cannot be distinguished from the effects of electoral rules. Why spending in PR systems typically is higher and skewed toward demographic redistribution remains ambiguous.

Stratmann and Baur (2002) test how individual representatives respond to incentives generated by different electoral rules. Germany's mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral system elects members to the Bundestag via both district seats and party lists. Since representatives to the same legislature are elected via both systems, it is possible to isolate the effects of electoral rules on incentives facing individual representatives. Specifically, Stratmann and Baur posit that representatives' committee choices will reflect their ability to channel funds to their re-election constituencies.² Consequently, representatives elected by electoral districts will seek committees allowing them to target spending or to play an advocacy role for their districts while those elected via party lists will seek those committees that enable them to transfer funds to or provide

¹ Mueller (2003, 290-301) surveys the literature.

² Shepsle and Weingast (1987) discuss the importance of committee membership in the American context; Stratmann and Baur (2002) further discuss the importance of committees within the German Bundestag.

support for party-supporting groups. Examining the allocation of seats on Bundestag committees during three legislative periods from 1990 to 2002, Stratmann and Baur find the expected systematic differences in committee assignments of list- and district-elected representatives. Stratmann and Baur's results suggest that the electoral system creates strong incentives for individual representatives to become members of committees allowing for redistribution towards their re-election constituencies. Consequently, the method of election may directly influence the composition and amount of government spending rather than working only through post-election coalition politics. We investigate whether New Zealand's recent adoption of an MMP system has created similar incentives for New Zealand Members of Parliament (MPs).

We follow Stratmann and Baur in taking a broad interpretation of pork-barrelling or redistributive activity. Any legislation, whether spending-related or otherwise, that provides targeted benefits with costs largely falling on others, we view as redistributive; where the overall costs of such legislation outweigh benefits, we may deem it "pork-barrelling". Just as highways and infrastructure spending in the United States often confers geographically concentrated benefits that are not sufficient to outweigh their dispersed costs,³ legislative changes such as those affecting public access to privately-held rural lands impose high costs on some groups while providing dispersed benefits to other demographic groups. We can view the latter legislation as redistribution from rural landholders to urban people who enjoy hiking; if the gains to urban hikers are less than the losses to farmers, it's a demographically-based pork-barrel transfer.

While we expect to find that MPs here face incentives similar to those faced by representatives to the Bundestag, the relative youth of the New Zealand MMP system may attenuate results somewhat; if MPs responding to the incentives in the MMP system face a higher chance of re-election than those who do not, stronger results will be found in a mature MMP system than in a new one, especially where such selection pressures are weak. Nevertheless, our results are broadly consistent with those of Stratmann and Baur. List-elected MPs are more likely to select onto committees targeting issues of importance

³ See, for example, Clines, Francis X. 2002. "How do West Virginians Spell Pork? It's B-Y-R-D". *New York Times* 4 May, A1. Senior senator Robert Byrd was infamous for his ability to bring home pork barrel spending projects.

to party supporters whereas district-elected MPs are more likely to join committees focusing on geographically-targeted issues.

After discussing New Zealand's electoral system and the role of select committees in Parliament, we develop and test specific hypotheses through difference of means and regression analysis. We then discuss our results and compare them with those of Stratmann and Baur.

2. The New Zealand electoral system.

In 1996, New Zealand replaced its First-Past-the-Post electoral system (FPTP) with a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system specifically adapted from that in place in Germany.⁴ Under a Mixed Member Proportional voting system each voter is allowed two votes: one for a district representative and one for a party. Each party receives an allocation of seats in Parliament proportional to the number of votes the party receives in the party vote. District MPs are chosen by a plurality election in each electorate; the number of district seats won is subtracted from each party's allocation. 'List' seats are then awarded to parties in order that party representation in Parliament is proportional to vote share. Parties rank order candidates to fill list allocated seats; national reputation and the importance of the member to the party have an influence in the ranking of candidates on party-lists. New Zealand's Parliament includes 52 Members selected from party lists as well as Members representing 62 general electorates and 7 Maori electorates in which only registered Maori voters may vote.

Members of Parliament may join Parliamentary Select Committees, which examine particular issues in more detail than would be possible in the House of Representatives. Bills are referred to the appropriate select committee after having been given first reading in Parliament. Parties are represented within select committees in proportion to party membership in the house, with individual membership decided by each particular party. The New Zealand Parliament includes eighteen committees, with areas of ministerial responsibility reflected in the thirteen subject committees. Following

⁴ In "Towards a Better Democracy: Report of the Royal Commission On the Electoral System" (1986), the Royal Commission recommends adoption of the German MMP system. Vowles (1998) describes the New Zealand MMP system. One notable difference between the systems is that while New Zealand uses a national party list system, German party lists are drawn at the *Lander* (state) level.

Stratmann and Baur, we hypothesize that the method of an MP's election will influence the MP's committee choices.

Two institutional differences between the Bundestag and Parliament lead us to expect weaker results in New Zealand than those found in Germany. First, where members of the Bundestag serve on only one committee, MPs may serve on many committees simultaneously. If an elected representative has particular policy interests that are orthogonal to re-election considerations, and if attendance on the electorally-relevant committee contributes to chances of re-election, the Kiwi MP may be able to indulge both interests by serving on multiple committees while the Bundestag representative must be more careful in committee selection. For example, if an MP representing a rural constituency has an abiding interest in defence issues, he may serve on the Primary Production committee to keep abreast of issues that may affect his district while also serving on the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade committee. We would, however, expect that MPs facing tighter re-election constraints will be less likely to split their attention across the different types of committees.

Second, Parliamentary committees are less powerful than are their Bundestag counterparts. Barker and McLeay (2000) argue that Cabinet retains the primary levers of power in Parliament, noting that the National-NZ First government formed subsequent to the 1996 election frequently overruled select committee recommendations. Nevertheless, committees remain important. There will be cases where legislative changes can be made at the committee stage to which the executive is indifferent but which will be of high value to a committee member's constituency, in which case committee membership can be particularly valuable. In other cases, committee membership will allow the MP to keep abreast of legislation that may adversely affect the constituency, and to warn both the executive and the constituency of those effects.

3. Hypotheses

MPs have incentives to stand on select committees in order to increase their probability of re-election: different committees will appeal to MPs elected via party lists compared to those from electoral districts. Karp (2002) argues that district MPs in the New Zealand MMP system respond to local interests while list MPs respond primarily to

party leaders and focus on issues that transcend geographical regions. We classify the subject committees in the New Zealand Parliament as ‘list’, ‘district’ or ‘neutral’, in accordance with the incentives of different legislator types to become members of these committees. List-elected MPs, we predict, will be more likely to seek membership of committees targeting demographically based issues: Maori, health, social services, and education. District-elected MPs are more likely to stand on committees that allow them to benefit their constituents, whether through geographically-targeted spending or otherwise. In many cases, particular committees will only appeal to MPs representing certain types of districts. The Maori committee will be particularly appealing to MPs representing Maori electorates. Heated debate concerning facility closures in low population density areas⁵ will make the education and health committees relatively appealing to rural MPs.⁶ Similarly, rural MPs will have stronger incentive to monitor issues relating to primary production: agriculture, mining and fisheries.⁷ Urban MPs will face higher constituent demands for assistance regarding social services; consequently, those MPs may have an enhanced incentive to sit on the social services committee. We classify as neutral those committees considering issues that are likely to be equally appealing to district and list MPs. Commerce, foreign affairs, defence & trade, finance & expenditure, justice & electoral, regulations review, and transport & industrial relations all consider a mix of issues we view as being equally likely to be of interest to district and to list elected MPs. For example, where transport on its own would be a quintessentially geographically-targeted committee, and hence of appeal to district MPs, the committee also considers industrial relations, which should be of interest to list-elected MPs as it targets labour issues. Committees such as Business, Government Administration, Officers of Parliament, Privileges, and Standing Orders relate solely to the business of the House and are dropped in subsequent analysis. Our classification of the committees appears in Table 1, below.

⁵ Kearns, Robin and Tim McCreanor (2003) *The New Zealand Herald*

⁶ Argument can be made that, because most hospital closures happened prior to our period of analysis and were handled through an arms-length agency meant to be insulated from political pressures, MPs on the health committee would not have had substantial input into which hospitals would be closed. Nevertheless, local MPs in rural areas might have sought to play an ombudsman role through committee membership and there could have used a position in that committee to bring pressure onto the government to reduce the number of closures. We consequently kept health as a qualified district committee for rural MPs. Alternative specifications removing health as a qualified district committee for rural MPs were run and did not result in any significant changes in results.

⁷ Note that the former fisheries committee is rolled into the Primary Production committee. For part of the period, the Fisheries committee considered the foreshore and seabed legislation, which would be of greater appeal to Maori district and to list MPs. Alternative specifications dropping the fisheries committee from inclusions did not substantially affect the results.

Table 1: Committee classification

List Committees	District Committees	Qualified District Committees	Neutral Committees
Maori Health Social Services Education	Local Government & Environment	Education (if rural) Health (if rural) Primary Resources (if rural) Maori (if Maori) Social Services (if not rural)	Commerce Finance & Expenditure Foreign Affairs, Defence & Trade Justice & Electoral Regulations Review Transport & Industrial Relations Business Government Administration Officers of Parliament Privileges Standing Orders

4. Data

New Zealand has conducted four elections under MMP.⁸ Elections and party list data was obtained from the Elections New Zealand website. Over the past four parliaments members of eight or nine different parties have been elected, depending how one wishes to treat the change of party from Alliance to Progressive. Of these, only three have consistently had MPs elected via both the list and district electoral system. We therefore restrict analysis to National, Labour and New Zealand First. Where a party elects only list or only district MPs, it is difficult to distinguish party effects from those due to method of election. Select committee membership was available through the Officer of the Clerk of the House of Representatives for the first three parliamentary periods and via the Parliamentary website for the most recent period.

Table 2, below, reports summary statistics on district-elected MP membership of the committees studied. District-elected MPs make up 62% of our observations.

⁸ These parliamentary periods are the 45th (1996), 46th (1999), 47th (2002) and 48th (2005).

Table 2: Committee summary statistics

Committee	MPs on Committee	District MPs as fraction of committee membership ⁹	District over or under representation ¹⁰
List	70	0.33	0.53
Maori	29	0.38	0.61
Health	31	0.61	0.99
Social Services	30	0.6	0.97
Education	28	0.54	0.86
District & Qualified District	87	0.77	1.44¹¹
Local Government & Environment	30	0.67	1.08
Education (if rural)	28	0.14	0.54
Health (rural)	31	0.39	1.46
Primary Resources (rural)	37	0.49	1.83
Maori (Maori)	29	0.28	6.48
Social Services (not rural)	30	0.5	1.42
Neutral	148	0.68	1.09
Commerce	27	0.67	1.08
Finance & Expenditure	36	0.69	1.13
Foreign Affairs, Defence & Trade	28	0.71	1.16
Justice & Electoral	51	0.71	1.14
Transport & Industrial Relations	29	0.62	1.00

⁹ Or, qualified membership (rural, Maori, non-rural) as fraction of committee membership for qualified district committees.

¹⁰ Or, ratio of district fraction of qualified membership (rural, Maori, non-rural) on committee as fraction of so-qualified members of all committees. So, for example, 12 of 31 health committee members are rural district MPs; 75 of 282 MPs represent rural districts, so rural district MPs are overrepresented on the health committee by a ratio of 1.46.

¹¹ Median of values for underlying committees

Committees we designate as being of appeal to list-elected MPs show a lower proportion of district MPs; those we designate as being of appeal to district-elected MPs generally show a higher proportion of district-elected MPs. Neutral committees show a slight overrepresentation of district-elected MPs. Analysis of qualified district committees reports figures proportionate to the relevant baseline. So, for example, four members of the education committee are district MPs elected from rural districts: 14% of that committee. 75 MPs of our 282 MP observations are rural district-elected MPs: 27%. Consequently, rural district MPs are under-represented on the education committee at a ratio of 0.54. Overall results for each category are reported in bold. Note that overall category membership may not equal the sum of the parts as a single MP can serve on multiple committees but will only be recorded as a single observation in the overall category. Also, a district-MP for whom a particular committee would be considered a district committee rather than a list committee is not included in the overall measure of membership on list committees: an MP from a Maori electorate on the Maori committee is not considered a list committee member if he serves on no other list-oriented committees, for example. Underlying list committee memberships report raw numbers not corrected for these particularities.

5. Results and discussion

We began by conducting simple t-tests of differences in mean committee membership by method of election for the different committee categories. While we do not find significant differences in list and district committee membership for each and every categorised committee, we do find large differences between the committees taken as a whole. District-elected MPs make up 55 percent of committees not designated as of particular interest to district-elected MPs but make up 77 percent of those so-designated, a difference significant at the 1% level in a two-tailed test. List-elected MPs make up 29 percent of committees not designated as of particular interest to list-elected MPs but make up 67 percent of those so-designated, a difference again significant at the 1% level in a two-tailed test. District-elected MPs make up 55 percent of committees not designated as being of neutral interest but make up 68 percent of committees so-designated, a difference significant at the 5% level in a two-tailed test. The t-tests

support our hypotheses concerning incentives to serve on district and list committees. However, where we expected no difference in list and district MP membership on neutral committees, we find a significantly higher proportion of district-elected MPs on neutral committees.

We generated a variable indicating those MPs selecting only onto “wrong” committees: district-elected MPs serving on list committees but not also on district committees and list-elected MPs serving on district committees but not also on list committees. Slightly less than nine percent of our MPs select the “wrong” committees. Conversely, 43 percent of MPs select onto the predicted committees and 39 percent select only onto neutral committees. Six percent of MPs serve on both “district” and “list” designated committees.

We constructed additional explanatory variables for inclusion in probit regressions. The *Border District* variable notes those districts won by a percentage point margin of victory one standard deviation less than the average margin of victory (a seven percentage point margin or less); the *Landslide District* variable notes those districts one by one standard deviation more than the average (a thirty-six percentage point margin or more). Similarly, *Border List* notes List MPs whose list position is within the bottom quarter of those list positions (per party per election) that were elected to Parliament on the Party List while *Landslide List* notes List-elected MPs whose list position is within the top quarter. We expect MPs elected by narrower margins to have heightened incentives to choose the correct committees while those elected by landslides can more freely indulge personal interests in committee selection. Dependent variables are membership on district or list oriented committees. Results are presented in Table 3, below.

In short, being a district MP strongly predicts being on a district committee and strongly negatively predicts being on a list committee. A district MP is 24 percent more likely to serve on a district committee, 38 percent more likely to choose only a district committee, 29 percent less likely to serve on a list committee and 19 percent less likely to serve only on a list committee than is a list MP. However, none of our other explanatory variables are successful in predicting outcomes. MPs elected in borderline districts seem more likely to serve on both district and list committees; the only result that approaches

Table 3: Probit regression results

	District Committee	List Committee	Only District Committee	Only List Committee
District MP	0.24 3.08***	-0.29 3.95***	0.38 4.3***	-0.19 2.84***
Border District	0.10 1.19	0.12 1.3	0.09 1.35	0.14 1.61
Landslide District	0.01 0.06	0.07 0.60	0.00 0.06	0.09 0.84
Border List	0.16 1.48	0.08 0.99	0.21 1.36	0.02 0.34
Landslide List	0.08 0.42	0.14 1.02	¹²	-0.01 0.07
N	282	282	282	282
Chi2	0.0051	0.0000	0.0000	0.0096
Pseudo R2	0.0479	0.1126	0.1705	0.0563

Note: Probit marginal effects reported (dprobit in Stata 9); t-statistics reported below coefficient estimates.

conventional significance levels is that an MP in a borderline district is more likely to serve only on a list committee. These MPs may be seeking to secure a higher rank on the party list where they feel re-election in the district is unlikely; however, whether this explains things remains to be tested. Moreover, specifications testing whether an MP sits on the predicted committee have no explanatory power. While method of election explains committee choice, what makes an MP select the correct committee is not explained by any of our variables. While the additional explanatory variables seem to have no effect in explaining the results, the method of MP election clearly predicts committee membership.

Regression analysis here remains preliminary. Many list-elected MPs failed election to a district seat; these MPs may have incentive to sit on district committees in hopes of strengthening their chances at the district seat in the next election. Preliminary regressions analyzing the 1996 to 2002 elections suggest that those list MPs are

¹² Landslide List was dropped in this specification as it perfectly predicted failure, preventing convergence in the estimates.

significantly more likely to sit on district committees; further work here will incorporate results from the 2005 election. Similarly, district MPs with a list ranking high enough to guarantee them election would have attenuated incentives to sit on district-oriented committees. Again, preliminary analysis here suggests that such list placement reduces the probability of sitting on a district committee. Still further work will test whether district heterogeneity reduces monitoring of district MPs and attenuates incentives to serve on district committees.

Overall, results are consistent with those found by Stratmann and Baur in the German Bundestag. Simple means comparison and probit regression show that the committee choices of New Zealand Members of Parliament are affected by their method of election. Those committees providing the greatest opportunity to monitor legislation affecting an MP's constituents, and thereby to direct benefits towards them, are the most attractive.

Results are not as strong as those found by Stratmann and Baur in the German context; however, we would be surprised if our results were as strong. Committees in New Zealand Parliament are less powerful than those in the Bundestag. We have had only four elections over nine years for selection pressures to operate where the Bundestag has operated under MMP for decades. If selection pressures are weak, it can take time for MPs to select onto the correct committees. Moreover, where the 603 Bundestag members must each sit each on only one committee, each of the 121 New Zealand MPs may sit on many or no committees. Intensity of effort within selected committees is not easily observable, leading to attenuation bias in the results if MPs work more diligently in the correctly-chosen committees than in other committees they may have chosen out of general interest. We also have evidence that some MPs are directed to sit on committees where they will do little harm to their party's interests;¹³ where party leadership does not wish those district MPs re-elected, attenuation bias again will result. Finally, because of the larger size of the Bundestag, German committees are more specific than their New Zealand counterparts. In addition to those seen in New Zealand, committees such as 'Women and Youth', 'Family' and 'Elderly' exist, which may provide a greater

¹³ Stephen Franks, personal correspondence.

opportunity for distinction between committees that appeal to list or district MPs. The greater range of issues within many New Zealand committees may lead to greater indifference among committees as the differential ability to support particular groups via membership in different committees is lower. Many MPs may then optimise by spending time working in local communities as opposed to serving on a particular select committees.

6. Conclusions and directions for future work

Countries using proportional electoral systems tend to have larger governments and to target a larger proportion of that spending towards demographic groups as compared to countries using plurality electoral systems. Persson and Tabellini (2003, 2005) suggest the difference is due to the operation of coalition politics post-election in PR systems. We do not discount the importance of this mechanism; KiwiBank, Families Commissions, and buy Kiwi-Made campaigns testify to the basic validity of the Persson and Tabellini hypothesis. However, electoral systems may also affect MP incentives directly (Milesi-Ferretti, 2002). We find that the method of election has a direct effect on an MP's choice of parliamentary committees in the New Zealand Parliament. District-elected MPs are significantly more likely to serve on committees where they are more likely to be able to distribute geographically-based benefits – pork, broadly construed – whereas list-elected MPs are significantly more likely to serve on committees where they can target benefits to broad demographic support groups.

Of course, the reduced form regressions here conducted obviously do not constitute a complete model of the incentives facing any legislator when choosing committee membership. However, we do not purport to provide a complete analysis of MP committee decisions. Rather, we are providing evidence that MP committee selection in New Zealand is consistent with models suggesting MPs work to provide benefits to their demographic or geographic constituents, and that such selection will depend on the MP's method of election. This supports Milesi-Ferretti's conclusion that electoral systems directly affect the method of pork-barrelling and that cross-country differences in observed results are not simply due to country-level fixed effects or factors underpinning the choice of electoral system.

Several avenues remain open for further work. As many district-elected MPs have a list fallback option, we may expect those MPs to face weaker incentives to choose district-oriented committees. Further, many list-elected MPs serve as list MPs because they failed election in a district; these MPs may continue to serve on district-oriented committees, either having built up human and reputational capital on those committees in a prior period, or in hopes of again contesting the district election. Finally, a richer set of constituency control variables ought to be included. Stratmann and Baur (2002) use district homogeneity as a proxy for the degree to which constituents monitor MPs. The New Zealand census has released constituency-level demographic details which can be incorporated into the analysis. We need also test whether MPs selecting the appropriate committees are more likely to be re-elected in the subsequent period; however, another election may be needed for an adequate sample as we do not yet know which MPs elected in 2005 will survive in 2008.

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