



NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL OF TRADE UNIONS
Te Kauae Kaimahi

20 September 2019

Justice Select Committee
Parliament Buildings
Wellington

Re: Electoral Amendment Bill

This brief submission is made by the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions Te Kauae Kaimahi, on behalf of our 27 affiliated unions. Through this submission we register our strong support for the policy intent of the Bill as it relates to increasing the access of New Zealanders to our democracy, through elections.

By way of introduction, like others we note and are concerned about the increasing fragility of democracy globally. As Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of our global peak body the International Trade Union Confederation said last year:

“Democracy is becoming collateral damage in a world where global risks have been ignored or exacerbated by those with the power to act. The increasing authoritarianism of elected leaders, the actions of entrenched dictators, and the use and threat of military power have brought us to the edge of full-blown crisis.”¹

New Zealand has a proud record of encouraging civic participation, and we view the changes to our electoral law to make voting more accessible than it currently is, in the context of these global tensions.

Falling rates of voter turnout are an increasing concern. Voter participation research generally indicates that electors’ reasons for non-voting are more likely around interest and motivation in voting, rather than practical considerations². Improving the accessibility of the voting system cannot be expected to address this; this is a wider issue well beyond simple voting logistics. That said, a significant enough number of electors identify practical and logistical challenges as their reason for not voting, including work commitments, location of polling booths and transport.

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/01/time-new-social-contract-inequality-work-sharan-burrow/>

² <https://elections.nz/democracy-in-nz/historical-events/2017-general-election/voter-and-non-voter-satisfaction-survey-2017/>

Anything that can be done to address these issues is welcome and making voting easier for people is supported by us. And this is the purpose of the Bill and is the reason for our strong support.

We have two primary points to make in relation to the proposed amendments.

1. Polling Places

We have previously submitted³ in support of more flexibility of the location of polling places, both for advance voting and on Election Day. We therefore strongly endorse the amendments to the Electoral Act that will allow supermarkets, malls, sports clubs and other high traffic places to be designated as polling places. Making it easier to vote by increasing the options and making sure that there are more voting booths venues close to where voters live and work is necessary and will be popular with electors.

Response from one of affiliates who represent shift workers was that changes should be made to make it easier for shift workers to vote by extending the opening hours for advance polling booths. If advance polling booths were open until the closing time of the supermarket (which is often 9 or 10pm) that would make it easier for shift workers to vote. The union also urged consideration to be given to polling booths within large workplaces or gathering areas such as hospitals, universities, factories or stock auctions (such as the weekly Wrightson stock sale) or farmers markets. This is supportive of the notion of mobile polling stations.

In our submission to the select committee review of the 2014 election, we also recommended further work be done on increased use of mobile voting booths. We copy below our recommendations from the time, and recommend that the Electoral Commission continue to explore this:

There are significant issues for many people who work shifts and/or multiple jobs in being able to get to either advance polling stations or a station on the final day of voting. This raises potentially very significant equity concerns about who gets to vote which are only partially resolved by advance voting stations being established. We strongly recommend that the Commission be instructed to report back on the likely cost and logistical issues involved in establishing a system of mobile polling booths, especially in heavily industrial areas. It is not adequate to say that there are operational difficulties involved in rolling out a mobile process.

2. Voting on Polling Day

We strongly support amendments to the Act to enable voters to enrol on polling day. This will be possible by changes to enable the Electoral Commission to treat a special vote declaration as an application for registration as an elector. This is entirely consistent with

³ NZCTU submission, Inquiry into the 2014 general election, 2015 <https://www.union.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/150331-General-Election-20140-Inquiry.pdf>

the objective of the Electoral Commission as set out in section 4 (c) of the Electoral Act, which includes as its first objective, that it *(a) facilitates participation in parliamentary democracy*.

Last election 19,000 people turned up to vote on Election Day—on the Saturday that was the nominated, designated election day—and could not vote. That is a lot of people who missed out on a basic democratic right. And a right that our society values highly. This Bill ensures fairness by enabling people who turn up on Election Day to be able to vote.

Our organisation represents working people from a full cross section of working life. Among our membership are workers who have stable incomes and accommodation and who will be on the Electoral Roll for uninterrupted periods of time. Also among our membership will be workers in precarious, casual work who have insecure and more transient housing. These workers are at higher risk of not being on the electoral roll and whom may cast a vote on polling day that is invalid. Their voices should have just the same weight as other electors, and so amendments to remove as many obstacles as possible to them casting a valid vote are to be strongly commended.

There has been major growth in advance voting in the last two elections and the current Election Day voting rules are inconsistent with the rules during advance voting. The Report into the 2017 General Election stated that 47 percent of voters cast their vote ahead of the designated Election Day.⁴ It projected that this will increase in the next Election with up to 65 percent of voters casting their vote in the advance voting period, leaving 35 percent to cast their vote on Election Day. The rule for advance voters and those that vote on Election Day should be the same and in doing so will add consistency and fairness to the voting system.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit on this important issue of working people's democratic rights.

Yours sincerely



Sam Huggard
NZCTU Secretary

⁴ <https://elections.nz/assets/2017-general-election/report-on-the-2017-general-election.pdf>