Influences on Citizens’ Electoral System Preferences: A Comparative Study of Britain and New Zealand

Willy Jou*

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Tsukuba, 1-1-1 Tennodai, Tsukuba-shi, Ibaraki-ken 305-0006, Japan

*Correspondence: jouw2015@yahoo.com

Choosing electoral systems is no longer a task confined to political elites, as evidenced by the increasing number of popular referendums on electoral reform. While previous works that discussed determinants of citizens’ electoral system preference have mostly relied on single case studies, this study examines this topic from a comparative perspective, analysing data from Britain and New Zealand in search of common factors that influence referendum vote. In addition to partisanship (large or small party identifier; supporter of major centre-right or centre-left party), satisfaction with democracy and cabinet type preference (single-party or coalition), results show that opinions on the key economic issues which have traditionally structured the ideological spectrum also exert a substantial impact.

Keywords: Alternative vote, Electoral system preference, Ideology, Mixed-member proportional system, First-past-the-post, Referendums

1. Introduction

In the literature on the use of popular referendums to settle constitutional issues, an increasing number of studies has been devoted specifically to referendums on electoral systems, particularly in the wake of such votes taking place in New Zealand in 1992–1993 (Levine and Roberts, 1994; Nagel, 1994; Vowles, 1995; Vowles and Lamare, 1996; Aimer and Miller, 2002) and in the UK in 2011 (Whiteley et al., 2012; Clarke et al., 2013; Curtice, 2013; Vowles, 2013). Whereas the conventional approach to electoral reform focuses on the rational interests and strategic interactions of political elites (Boix, 1999; Benoit, 2004; Colomer, 2005), instances of entrusting the decision to maintain or overhaul extant electoral rules to ordinary voters have prompted more scholars to examine factors that influence individual attitudes towards electoral systems. However, most studies have concentrated on
a single case. While revealing important insights on vote determinants in a given referendum, this approach necessarily raises questions about the wider applicability of their findings. In view of this, this study analyses surveys conducted for two referendums, those in Britain and New Zealand in 2011, with the purpose of identifying common elements that affect citizens’ electoral system preferences.

Factors identified in the literature as exerting substantial impact on attitudes towards electoral systems include partisanship, (dis)satisfaction with the political system, assessment of government performance, appraisal of party leaders, political knowledge and willingness to take risks. Unsurprisingly, preferences on the type of government (single party or coalition) also emerge as a significant and substantive influence when included in the analysis. Another set of beliefs that has been widely applied in general studies of voting behaviour, namely ideology, is curiously absent from many analyses on electoral system referendums (for an exception, see Banducci and Karp, 1999). Scholars have pointed out that many referendums are non-partisan contests (Uleri, 2002), with the ballot issues orthogonal to the traditional left–right divide (Laycock, 2013). Nevertheless, we argue that ideological orientations, understood in traditional economic terms, can affect opinions towards electoral systems and test this hypothesis below.

This article is organised as follows: we begin with a review of the literature on referendums in general and those that pertain to electoral system choice in particular, in order to develop hypotheses on factors that can influence voting behaviour in such contests cross-nationally. Data and variables are described in Section 3, before we proceed to the presentation and discussion of empirical results. Section 5 addresses differences specific to each country’s party system context. The last section summarises our findings and offers some concluding remarks.

2. Vote determinants in electoral system referendums

The literature on referendums often brings up two important questions: (i) To what extent do voters understand the ballot issue(s)? (ii) What influences their vote choice? The answer to both questions can be linked, given that on institutional questions such as electoral reform, most voters may not be familiar with the issue, and thus choose to follow cues provided by sources they deem trustworthy (Sniderman et al., 1991). Several scholars have pointed out that many voters lack the time and interest to comprehend referendum issues (Borges and Clarke, 2008), while other studies provided evidence of a relatively low level of knowledge of referendum issues among the electorate (e.g. Neijens et al., 1998).

This use of cues is rational for voters who consider the cost of information gathering too high relative to any potential benefit derived from a desired referendum outcome, and some scholars have found that relying on cues is no less effective than processing complete information (Gigerenzer, 2008). For example, voters may
decide how to mark their referendum ballot based on which politicians support or oppose the initiative (LeDuc, 2003). One of the most commonly used cues is partisanship. For example, partisanship was reported to be ‘clearly the single strongest determinant of how people voted’ in the New Zealand electoral system referendum in 1993 (Aimer and Miller, 2002, p. 799), and Whiteley et al. (2012) showed that this factor exerted a similarly substantial effect on vote choice in the UK Alternative Vote (AV) referendum. Indeed, Franklin et al. asserted that ‘partisan attachments are almost certainly the primary factor in referendum voting’, exerting as substantial an influence as they do in general elections (1995, p. 105).

Other studies present a contrary view. Hobolt (2009) pointed out that partisanship matters less than issue positions in referendum votes. In the AV referendum, Curtice concluded that ‘partisan cues did not have any impact at all’ after controlling for voter attitudes towards arguments presented by each campaign’ (2013, p. 222), and Clarke et al. (2013) demonstrated that the magnitude of the partisan effect was minimal compared with judgements about the costs and benefits of adopting AV and opinions towards a proportional system. There have been numerous cases where voters did not simply follow the party cue in referendums (e.g. Mitbo and Hines, 1998; De Vreese, 2006). One illustrative example is that while the two large parties in New Zealand garnered 83 percent of votes cast in the 1993 General Election, the referendum option that both parties supported (i.e. keeping a plurality system) was overwhelmingly rejected. In addition, in some instances referendums are called due to disagreement within the government. Since ‘a referendum can highlight divisions inside single political organisations’ (Uleri, 2002, p. 873), a party may not be in a position to offer a clear cue even if its supporters wish to toe the party line.¹

While most studies heretofore simply used identification with, or feeling towards, individual parties as independent variables when examining determinants of voting behaviour in electoral system referendums, such an approach limits comparability in cross-national studies. Instead of specific parties, it is necessary to develop theories based on party characteristics. The most straightforward categorisation, and one that can be readily applied across countries, is the distinction between large and small parties. The well-known ‘Duverger’s law’ postulates that a plurality or first-past-the-post (FPTP) system favours two-party competition at the district level. If the same parties are competitive across most districts in the country, then a nationwide two-party system would be formed (Cox, 1999), at the expense of smaller parties for which voters would have little incentive to cast ‘wasted’ votes. Ceteris paribus, large parties stand to benefit from FPTP, often obtaining legislative majorities on the basis of less than 50 per cent of votes (and

¹This was the case in the AV referendum, with Labour ‘sending a mixed message’ (Whiteley et al., 2012, p. 312).
occasionally even without a plurality of votes). Conversely, most small parties with nationwide support can expect a better performance under more proportional rules. If voters follow the cue of partisanship, one would expect that voters supporting one of the two large nationwide parties to favour plurality, and those who identify with smaller parties to endorse more proportional systems.

In the electoral system referendums in New Zealand (1992–1993) and the UK (2011), the centre-right parties—National and Conservative, respectively—clearly advocated retaining a plurality system, while smaller parties called for change. In the New Zealand referendum, all minor parties called for the replacement of FPTP that had given unjust advantage to the two major parties (Levine and Roberts, 1994, p. 242). The Liberal Democrats and most other smaller parties in the UK took a clear stance in favour of a Yes vote in the AV referendum, even though they preferred a more proportional system than the AV. It is notable that the Scottish National Party, a typical example of a small party with regionally concentrated support that stands to benefit from overrepresentation under FPTP, also came out in support of AV. The Labour Party in both countries was seen as taking an ambiguous stance, though one should note that Labour leaders and MPs in New Zealand were largely opposed to adopting a proportional system in the referendum lest they would no longer be able to win majority government in the future (Vowles and Lamare, 1996, p. 324); and among Labour MPs in the UK, opponents of AV outnumbered supporters by three to one, notwithstanding the party’s manifesto commitment in the 2010 General Election (Qvortrup, 2012, p. 109).

The instrumental motivation for major parties and their supporters to favour a plurality system is readily understandable. The main centre-right and centre-left parties in both Britain and New Zealand have benefited under this system, gaining a greater percentage of parliamentary seats than their vote shares, not only when they won government but also sometimes when they were relegated to the opposition benches. The attitudes of both major parties leading up to the electoral system referendums in New Zealand in 1992–1993 provide a clear illustration: even though a Labour prime minister pledged a referendum, and National, then in opposition, followed with the same promise, ‘both Labour and National governments actively tried to undermine and sabotage a reform process to which they were seemingly committed in principle’ (LeDuc, 2011, p. 564). This reaction was hardly surprising

---

2This does not apply to parties with regionally concentrated support, as exemplified by the Bloc Québécois in Canada during 1993–2008, and the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the 2015 British General Election.

3After a royal commission set-up by a Labour government recommended a proportional system, ‘the Labour caucus tried to put the lid back on’, and the government established a parliamentary select committee which rejected this recommendation in favour of more modest institutional adjustments (Nagel, 1994, p. 526). This is in line with the rationale of a large party defending its own electoral interests.
in view of both parties’ electoral incentives. In contrast, the fact that most minor party supporters voted to replace FPTP in the 1993 New Zealand referendum (Levine and Roberts, 1994, p. 249) was paralleled in the AV vote.

We hypothesise that what may mediate this large versus small party divide over electoral system preference, and explain in part why Labour supporters were less keen on FPTP than Conservative or National identifiers, is value orientations. For example, in a study on the AV referendum, Vowles noted that ‘authoritarians are likely to prefer strong one-party government’ whereas ‘liberals are more likely to favour coalition governments that are based on the politics of negotiation’ (2013, p. 256). Analysis of a New Zealand survey also revealed that respondents on the right were less supportive of a change to a proportional system (Banducci and Karp, 1999). While electoral system design does not seem directly related to the issues that structure the left–right axis in each country, we expect that a preference for decisive, single-party government that FPTP is likely to produce would be more attractive to right-leaning voters.

Another factor that may affect electoral system preference is whether one voted in the preceding election for a party that ended up in government or opposition, sometimes labelled in the literature as being an electoral ‘winner’ or ‘loser’, respectively. Winner–loser status is distinct from partisanship, particularly in an era when an increasing proportion of the electorate no longer consistently support any party. In the survey used for this study, while 78 per cent of Conservative voters in 2010 identified with the party, this was only true for 36 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters. Those who did not identify with, but nevertheless marked their ballots for, either of these two parties that went on to form a coalition government, are considered ‘winners’. Previous studies have found that winners are more inclined to express confidence in the political system and deem the electoral process fair. One may thus expect that they would also be more supportive of the set of electoral rules that allowed the party they voted for to occupy the government benches.

Vote choice on referendums can also be a function of how citizens feel about the incumbent government. One version of this view sees referendums ‘as special cases of second order national elections’ (Franklin et al., 1995, p. 110), so that citizens can express discontent with the government by voting against the referendum proposal. This includes supporters of governing parties who can ‘send a message’ without running the risk of seeing their favoured parties lose power. In the 1993 New Zealand referendum, scholars found that ‘the more favourably voters assessed the [incumbent] National government’s performance, the more likely they were to vote to retain the first-past-the-post electoral system’ (Levine and Roberts, 1994, p. 249; see also Vowles et al., 1995, p. 189). However, Banducci and Karp showed that evaluations of government performance, measured by the proxy of economics assessments, ‘do not appear to influence support for the referendum’
Similarly, Vowles (2013) did not find any effect of government performance on vote choice in the AV referendum.

Dissatisfaction with the government is often concomitant with, but is analytically distinct from, lack of efficacy with respect to the political process. The latter, stemming not from opinion about policy outcomes but instead feelings of ‘procedural utility’, that is, being able to take part in the process (Stutzer and Frey, 2006), can be particularly salient in electoral system referendums since campaigns often focus on which set of rules better reflect ordinary voters’ concerns. In the AV referendum, the Yes campaign emphasised distrust of elites as a reason to replace the existing set of electoral rules. An analysis of the 1993 New Zealand electoral system referendum revealed that perceptions of ‘fairness’, encompassing views on whether government is run by big interests and whether members of parliaments are out of touch, had a substantial impact on voting behaviour (Banducci and Karp, 1999). One would thus expect that citizens who feel excluded from the political process under existing institutional arrangements would endorse change.

The preceding paragraph seems to suggest that citizens discontented with their political system would be inclined towards overturning the status quo. Yet studies on representation have highlighted the consequences of different electoral rules (Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000), which carry implications for system support. One well-known example is the study by Anderson and Guillory which revealed that electoral systems ‘mediate the extent to which there is a gap in satisfaction with democracy between winners and losers’, with proportional systems having the effect of allaying electoral losers’ disappointment while tempering the triumphant mood of electoral winners (1997, p. 78). To the extent that the sustainability of democratic regimes rests in part on losers’ acceptance of defeat (Anderson et al., 2005), one may hypothesise a relationship between satisfaction with democracy and an institutional design that mollifies losers’ discontent, i.e. electoral rules that yield more proportional outcomes. In addition, whereas FPTP presents a daunting barrier to minority voices attaining a parliamentary foothold, rules that yield proportional electoral outcomes can increase the legitimacy of a political system by giving legislative representation to protest parties (Miller and Listhaug, 1990, pp. 364–366).

The link between knowledge and the propensity to follow cues has been noted above, but individual voters’ level of political knowledge may also exert an independent effect on their referendum choice. More knowledgeable citizens are likely to be more aware of both deficiencies in the present system and the possible merits (as well as drawbacks) of proposed alternatives and may thus be more open to the prospect of change. In contrast, less well-informed citizens may be inclined to vote against change due to a status quo bias (Nadeau et al., 1999; LeDuc, 2003). Whiteley et al.’s (2012) study on the AV referendum indeed reported a positive and significant
relationship between knowledge (and also education) and a Yes vote, though the magnitude of this effect was limited (see also Clarke et al., 2013).

In sum, the literature suggests a number of plausible influences on vote choice in electoral system referendums, including partisanship, winner-loser status, government performance evaluation, political efficacy, satisfaction with democracy, and political knowledge. For the purpose of developing a framework useful for comparative analysis, we deem it advisable to substitute country-specific party and leader names with theoretical propositions regarding the role of partisanship and choose to focus on the distinction between large and small party support. Moreover, we test the hypothesis that ideological orientations may exert an independent influence on electoral system preference.

3. Data and variables

Data for this study are taken from two sources: the British Election Study (BES) survey on the AV referendum, and the New Zealand Election Study (NZES) survey of the 2011 General Election, held concurrently with an electoral system referendum. While a NZES survey is also available for an earlier referendum in New Zealand that led to the adoption of a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system, unfortunately questions that would allow for testing the effect of several factors explicated in the preceding section were not asked; therefore this study only concentrates on the 2011 referendum. Voters in both countries decisively rejected the proposal to replace the existing rules (FPTP in Britain, MMP in New Zealand). Interestingly, Table 1 shows that whereas the winning side was slightly overrepresented in the New Zealand data, a not uncommon observation in election surveys, in the UK survey Yes voters (i.e. AV supporters) are actually overrepresented.

Two questions were asked on the New Zealand referendum ballot. In addition to the first question on whether MMP should be retained, voters were also asked a second question: ‘If New Zealand were to change to another voting system, which voting system would you choose?’ The choices on the ballot were FPTP, preferential voting, single transferable vote and supplementary member (also known as a mixed-member majoritarian system). Each of these alternatives is likely to yield

| Table 1 | Electoral reform referendum and survey results in Britain and New Zealand |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **UK referendum** | **Actual result** | **BES survey** | **New Zealand referendum** | **Actual result** | **NZES survey** |
| For AV | 32.1% | 39.9% | Keep MMP | 57.8% | 60.0% |
| Against AV | 67.9% | 60.1% | Replace MMP | 42.2% | 40.0% |
less proportional results than MMP. In fact, among these four options, FPTP received the highest support, meaning that had MMP been rejected on the first question, voters would be called on to decide between MMP and FPTP in a follow-up referendum. As polls leading up to the referendum consistently indicated that plurality was by far the preferred option among the proposed alternatives to MMP, voters likely understood that, in the event of a majority against MMP, FPTP would be the most probably replacement. Seat distribution, and hence the nature of government formation, would be vastly different under these two systems.

The same cannot be said with respect to the AV referendum, which Curtice described as ‘a choice between two majoritarian systems... which could well produce not dissimilar overall outcomes’ (2013, p. 219). Indeed, no party initially advocated AV, and ‘there was almost no demand for or interest in AV among the public’ (Vowles, 2013, p. 255). Instead, the ballot proposal resulted from an agreement reached between the two parties in the governing coalition, as ‘the one point of compromise between those who wanted to keep single member plurality and those who preferred proportional representation’ (Curtice, 2013, p. 218). Simulations of election outcomes show that the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors, who have been consistently disadvantaged under FPTP, would have gained additional seats in the House of Commons in each election from 1983 to 2005, even if in most cases their percentage of seats would still fall well below their vote share. The same simulations also revealed that the ranks of the parliamentary Conservative party would in most cases be smaller than they actually were had elections been conducted under an AV system.

In other words, while AV is closer to an FPTP than a proportional system, in the context of contemporary British politics, it would likely benefit not only the Liberal Democrats but potentially also other small parties that can attract votes from supporters of the two major parties. This might in turn reduce the likelihood of any party obtaining a majority in an election. In so far as right-leaning voters prefer the decisiveness of single-party majority governments, one would expect a greater inclination among self-identified leftists to endorse MMP and AV, even if the latter system falls far short of being proportional. Furthermore, we hypothesise that any relationship between ideological orientation and electoral system preference is not merely a proxy for other factors such as income, political alienation or partisanship, but exerts an independent influence.

Unfortunately, the absence of questions on ideological placements in the BES questionnaire for the AV referendum compels us to look for alternative measures. While recognising that political competition in Britain is no longer as class-based as in the immediate post-war decades, studies have affirmed that, similar to many other advanced democracies, economic issues remain the most important

dimension (Huber and Inglehart, 1995; Benoit and Laver, 2006). In view of this, we use a question on preference for cutting taxes versus raising public spending as a proxy. At a first glance, Figure 1 shows a clear relationship between respondents’ view on this key economic issue and their propensity to vote Yes in the AV referendum. Six out ten respondents who preferred greater public spending through tax hikes favoured AV, whereas only a quarter of those who wanted to see tax reductions did so. Another question on whether Britain’s debt problem was caused by excessive public spending yielded a similarly strong correlation with referendum choice.

The NZES survey did ask respondents to place themselves on an 11-point left–right scale, as well as soliciting their views on a number of economic questions. Both ideological self-placement and opinion on the government’s role in narrowing the poverty gap show that those professing leftist orientations and a belief in the government’s responsibility for reducing income differences were far more likely to endorse MMP. More than four out of five self-identified leftists voted for keeping this proportional system, double the rate of MMP supporters among right-leaning citizens (Figure 2). The difference between respondents who most strongly agreed and disagreed with an active government role in ameliorating income inequality is of the same magnitude. When one considers the results from both countries together, it appears that what distinguished left and right was not a question of preserving the status quo—conservatives in New Zealand displayed little enthusiasm for conserving the MMP system that had been in use for a decade and a half by the time of the 2011 referendum—but instead a question of greater or lesser likelihood of elections yielding single-party governments.

However, one cannot yet rule out the possibility that these differences in referendum voting behaviour resulted not from ideological or economic issue

![Figure 1. Percentage voting for change in Britain (adopting AV).](https://academic.oup.com/pa/article-abstract/69/3/621/1753420)
preferences per se, but were rather rooted in other factors described in the previous section such as partisanship, attitudes towards the political system, evaluation of the government, as well as socio-demographic characteristics such as education and income. Exploring these possible explanations requires a multivariate analysis. Since the referendum ballot in both countries offered a yes-or-no choice (only the first referendum question in New Zealand is analysed here), logistic regression is the appropriate method for treating a dichotomous dependent variable. We take into account age, gender, education, household income, identification with large (Conservative and Labour in Britain, National and Labour in New Zealand) or small parties, vote for a governing or opposition party in the preceding election, retrospective assessment of the economy (as a proxy for government performance), feelings of political efficacy, satisfaction with democracy, level of political knowledge and preferred cabinet type (single-party or coalition). Coding for each variable is listed in Appendix A.

4. Comparing the effect of vote determinants on electoral system referendums

Logistic regression results for referendum vote in both countries are shown in Table 2. Coefficients do not lend themselves to straightforward interpretation, and in the British case the large sample size means that even factors that had limited impact can reach conventional levels of statistical significance. To compare the

---

Respondents who voted for parties which reached a confidence and supply agreement with the National minority government (United Future, ACT, Maori) are coded as ‘winners’ since their parties could exercise influence on policy making.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UK</th>
<th></th>
<th>New Zealand</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Standard error</td>
<td>95% Confidence interval</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.030***</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.967</td>
<td>0.974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.307***</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>1.235</td>
<td>1.495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>−0.162***</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.822</td>
<td>0.879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.027***</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>1.016</td>
<td>1.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td>1.199***</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>2.973</td>
<td>3.698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winner/loser status</td>
<td>0.651***</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>1.732</td>
<td>2.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy</td>
<td>−0.031**</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.950</td>
<td>0.991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>−0.677***</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.478</td>
<td>0.541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic evaluation</td>
<td>0.228***</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>1.193</td>
<td>1.322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>−0.013</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.953</td>
<td>1.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>0.238***</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>1.238</td>
<td>1.299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet type</td>
<td>0.886***</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>2.306</td>
<td>2.553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>preference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−1.490***</td>
<td>0.220</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R²</td>
<td>0.412</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ‘Ideology’ in the UK survey refers to respondents’ stance on the question of tax cuts versus increased welfare spending.

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01.
magnitude of the effect exerted by each variable, the findings are also presented in terms of a probability between 0 (keeping the existing electoral system, that is FPTP in Britain and MMP in New Zealand) and 1 (voting for change, i.e. adopting AV in Britain and replacing MMP in New Zealand). Figure 3 depicts the difference in probabilities of voting for the status quo in the AV referendum between the maximum and minimum values of each given factor while all other variables are held constant at their mean value. For example, BES respondents who identified with the Conservative and Labour parties had a 30 per cent chance of endorsing AV, compared with 44 per cent of those who professed no partisanship and 59 per cent of those who backed all other parties.

The result showing that small party supporters were twice as likely to endorse AV as large party supporters is hardly unexpected. What the figure seeks to illustrate is the relative magnitude of each variable on referendum vote choice. For instance, while political efficacy is statistically significant, the difference in probability between respondents who feel most strongly that they have no influence on politics and those who did not share this sentiment at all is only 7 per cent. In contrast, respondents who were most dissatisfied with democracy had a 61 per cent chance of favouring AV, while the figure for those most satisfied with the political system is a very low 17 per cent—a much wider gap which indicated that this factor had a considerably larger effect on how voters marked their referendum ballots, in fact exerting a greater impact than partisanship. One would expect opinions on cabinet type to be most closely associated with attitudes towards AV, and this is confirmed by the finding that respondents who view coalition cabinets negatively had a drastically lower probability of voting for change (12 per cent) than those who consider multi-party government a good idea (82 per cent). This is by far the largest gap among all the variables analysed.

Figure 3. Probability of voting for change (adopting AV) in Britain.
It is notable that, other than views on the merits or otherwise of a coalition cabinet, opinions on the question of increasing spending versus cutting taxes made the most substantial impact on AV referendum vote. The strongest backers of increased public spending via raising taxes had a 64 per cent probability of supporting a change to AV, compared with a low 14 per cent among the most fervent advocates of tax cuts. Note that these numbers are computed after controlling for potential intervening variables such as education, income, partisanship, incumbent government evaluation (in terms of economic performance) and cabinet type preference. Thus, the results clearly demonstrate that attitudes towards the role of government in the economy, which have long structured the primary left–right divide in British politics, affect not only party identification and voting behaviour, but also opinion on the more abstract issue of electoral system choice. The magnitude of the difference between citizens with opposing views on tax issues is similar when this question is replaced with one on whether respondents thought Britain’s debt was caused by excessive public spending: voters who strongly believe so were much less likely to cast their ballot for AV (18 per cent, compared with 62 per cent for those who do not share this view at all).

Analysis of data from New Zealand yields patterns that resemble those found in Britain (see Figure 4). Note that in this case higher probability denotes greater propensity to reject MMP. As one would expect, National and Labour partisans were most likely to favour change (41 per cent likelihood of voting for change), supporters of all other parties were most opposed (29 per cent), with non-partisans in between (35 per cent). The position of National and Labour as the biggest parties and holders of the prime ministership remain the same under both FPTP and MMP, but since the introduction of the latter system neither party has been able to attain more than 50 per cent of seats in parliament, making coalitions or minority cabinets with confidence and supply agreements with one or more of the smaller

Figure 4. Probability of voting for change (replacing MMP) in New Zealand.
parties necessary. A desire to see a legislative majority for the party they voted probably accounts for the greater probability of electoral winners voting against AV and MMP in Britain and New Zealand, respectively.

Just as in Britain, cabinet type preference made the most substantive difference to referendum vote choice: respondents inclined towards single-party governments were more likely to vote for change (71 per cent) than those who favour coalitions (23 per cent) by an overwhelming margin. Another parallel between the two countries is the relative unimportance of political efficacy (i.e. whether voters feel they can influence politics) on how they marked the referendum ballot. Moreover, and understandably, respondents who expressed discontent with the political system in both countries were more willing to contemplate overhauling the extant electoral rules, as evidenced by the wide gap in voting probability between those who were most and least satisfied with democracy.

One key argument of this study, that ideological orientations affect electoral system preference, also finds empirical corroboration in New Zealand: respondents who placed themselves farthest to the left were much less likely to reject MMP (22 per cent) than their counterparts on the right (51 per cent). Similar to Britain, the magnitude of this difference is comparable to that found for satisfaction with democracy, and discernibly greater than partisanship. Substituting the ideological self-placement question with one that solicited views on whether the government should take measures to reduce income disparity yields comparable results: respondents who answered in the affirmative had a significantly higher probability of voting to retain MMP than those who advocated less government intervention (by a difference in probability of 22 per cent).

It is also worth noting that the impact of ideological orientations does not depend on the composition of the incumbent government. The fact that centre-right governments were in power when the electoral system referenda were held in both Britain and New Zealand does not account for the linkage between right-leaning views and support for rules expected to render single-party government more likely. Questions on both ideological self-placement and electoral system preference have been asked in all NZES since the early 1990s and, after controlling for other variables included in this study, a significant relationship is found between leftist positions and support for MMP (in the absence of an actual referendum, respondents were asked to indicate which electoral rules they preferred, rather than how they voted) following each election regardless of whether the government at the time was headed by National or Labour.

The most notable difference between results in the two countries concerns the role of political knowledge. In New Zealand, greater political knowledge was significantly related to rejection of MMP (a difference in probability of 22 per cent between voters with the highest and lowest scores on the knowledge scale), in contrast to Britain where there was little difference in the likelihood of endorsing AV
between politically sophisticated respondents and those who were not (3 per cent). One should bear in mind, however, that questions used to construct the knowledge scale in each country were different and thus not necessarily comparable. Another difference is with regard to economic evaluation. Whereas in Britain respondents who discerned a deteriorating economy had a higher propensity to endorse change by voting for AV, in New Zealand those professing a negative retrospective assessment of the economy were inclined to maintain the status quo.

5. Taking context into account: partisan differences in the UK and New Zealand

Two of the findings discussed above can point to contradictory cues in some circumstances. For supporters of the major centre-right party in each country, one could predict a vote for a system intended to produce single-party majority cabinets. Similarly, those backing small left-wing parties would have little cause for hesitation when endorsing a system that renders coalitions more likely. But partisan and ideological incentives would come into conflict for respondents who identified with the major centre-left party, as well as small right-wing parties. The former group warrants particular attention due to its size. In other words, which factor did Labour supporters in the UK and New Zealand prioritise when making their referendum choice? To address this question, one must look at the context of party competition in each country in greater detail.

The empirical findings displayed in Table 2 and Figures 3 and 4 compare the referendum choice of large party supporters with independents and small party supporters. The number of respondents who identify with small parties in each survey is often too small for further statistical analysis (except for the Liberal Democrats), but one can break down the classification of large party backers by their partisan inclination. From solely instrumental considerations, major parties—and those who follow their cues—share an interest in keeping or re-adopting FPTP. Yet as shown above, voters with leftist orientations tend to favour electoral rules that facilitate representation for a wider range of political views, which suggest that Labour supporters should be more supportive of adopting AV or maintaining MMP than their Conservative or National counterparts.

To test this, we substitute the three-category (large party, small party and independent) party identification variable in Table 2 with dummies for identification with each large party, while keeping all other variables unchanged. It turns out that the choice of Labour supporters in both countries was indeed distinguishable.

6It is also possible that, with particular respect to how alternative electoral rules operate, the average level of knowledge among the British electorate might be lower than their New Zealand counterparts, since electoral reform has been a more salient issue in the latter country for over two decades.
from respondents who backed with the Conservative or National Party. In the UK, Labour identifiers were 26 per cent more likely to favour AV than Conservatives; in New Zealand, Labour identifiers were 14 per cent more inclined to retain MMP than their National counterparts. The probability of small party supporters overall to endorse AV or MMP was still higher than Labour supporters in both countries, but there are variations here as well. While in most cases sample sizes are too limited for similar statistical analysis, the same conflict of incentives may be glimpsed through their reported referendum choice. High percentages of respondents identifying with the leftist Greens and Scottish National Party (86 and 62 per cent, respectively) endorsed AV, but the same was not true for small parties on the right such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and British National Party (31 and 39 per cent, respectively), even though UKIP would likely have gained more seats under AV in the subsequent General Election.

Perhaps the most unexpected result to emerge from re-analysing referendum choice with party dummy variables is the significant negative coefficient for Labour supporters in New Zealand, meaning that they were more likely to favour keeping MMP despite the party’s greater probability of gaining a parliamentary majority under an alternative system. In fact, had Labour backers in New Zealand been as indifferent towards MMP as their British counterparts were towards AV, the proposal to replace MMP would have passed. The explanations behind this finding, which contradicts our expectation regarding the instrumental incentive for large party supporters, require more detailed research, but some possible reasons include the leftist ideological motivation; the availability of more potential coalition partners for Labour than for National within the party system; and the fact that Labour was in opposition. Concerning the latter, NZES has included a question on electoral system preference since 1993, and support for MMP among Labour backers was lowest when their party was poised to win a general election (in 1999, 2002 and 2005).

Other findings discussed in the preceding section largely remain valid when the large versus small party identification variable is replaced with specific parties. In both countries, respondents preferring coalition over single-party governments are still found to be much more inclined towards AV and MMP; those professing dissatisfaction with democracy still favour overturning the status quo; views on political efficacy still exerts little influence. Political knowledge still makes a significant difference in New Zealand (with more knowledgeable respondents leaning towards change) but not in the UK. The importance of ideological positions is reaffirmed. In the UK, respondents most enthusiastic about increasing public spending had a 52 per cent probability of voting for AV, compared with only 19 per cent for the strongest advocates of tax cuts. In New Zealand, the equivalent figures are 47 per cent for those placing themselves at the left end of the ideological spectrum compared with

---

We thank a referee reading an earlier version of this article for raising this point.
25 per cent likelihood for their opposite numbers on the right. In short, even when context-specific party factors are added into the analysis, the hypothesis that positions on the main axis of party competition exert a substantive effect on referendum vote choice still holds true.

6. Conclusion: towards a generalisable theory

The preceding pages analysed surveys from electoral system referendums in Britain and New Zealand in an attempt to identify commonalities that can contribute to developing cross-nationally applicable theories. Given that the tasks of designing, debating and deciding on electoral rules are often the preserve of political elites, the relevance of investigating the preferences of ordinary citizens on this seemingly abstract topic may appear limited. Yet many proposals for significant changes to existing electoral rules now involve consulting the electorate, for the purpose of political legitimacy if not legal obligation. In view of the growing number of electoral system referendums, we have examined factors that influence vote choice and compared the relative magnitude of their impact. Several conclusions emerge from the analysis above: small party supporters and those who favour coalition over single-party governments prefer rules that are likely to see more parties entering parliament; citizens dissatisfied with the democratic system seek change to existing institutional rules; feelings of political efficacy have relatively little effect. Many of these results are intuitive and in line with previous studies (e.g. Banducci and Karp, 1999).

One finding worth emphasising is the substantive effect of individual views on issues that have traditionally defined the ideological spectrum: after controlling for other factors, self-identified leftists are found to be considerably more inclined to rules that facilitate more parties gaining legislative representation than their right-leaning counterparts. This does not merely reflect partisanship, which is already taken into account through the large versus small party supporter and the electoral winner/loser variables, as well as when dummies for identifiers with specific parties are included. When ideological and instrumental partisan incentives come into conflict, such as in the case of supporters of major centre-left parties, the former may take precedent, as demonstrated for respondents identifying with Labour in New Zealand. Indeed, insofar as the Labour leadership signalled a cue in the referendum, it was in support of maintaining MMP, in contrast with the party’s stance in the 1992 and 1993 referendums. Thus, how partisans react to conflicting instrumental and ideological incentives, as faced by supporters of major parties on the centre-left and centre-right or right-wing small parties, can be more dependent on specific party system contexts and presents a subject for further research.

Ideological orientation, as captured by views on the role of government in the economy, tends to be relatively stable over time, in contrast to other explanations
for referendum vote choice such as evaluation of particular party leaders or recent economic conditions, or exposure to campaign activities. This implies that electoral system preferences are at least partially the result of long-term beliefs, not just short-term calculations or elite mobilisation. The fact that a significantly higher percentage of Labour than Conservative supporters voted for AV, despite a FPTP system that has operated to Labour’s advantage over several elections (Blau, 2001; Johnston et al., 2006), lends support to this conclusion.\(^8\)

One should keep in mind that while the government’s proper role in the economy has been a perennial topic of political debate in Britain and a key anchor of ideology, the issue of tax cuts versus increased welfare spending—or any other single policy issue—does not capture the full nuances of what ‘left’ or ‘right’ stands for. Nevertheless, similar results that we found when substituting other economic questions in the BES survey for the tax and welfare item lend some confidence to the conclusion that ideology does exert an independent and substantial influence when voters evaluate different electoral rules.

Finally, the question of whether the findings above, particularly with regard to the impact of ideological orientations, can be generalised in other contexts requires one to elucidate the causal linkage between views on economic issues and electoral system preference in more depth. In addition to the possibility raised above that right-leaning citizens espouse the decisiveness of single-party governments that a plurality system is more likely to produce, while leftists are more inclined towards the goals of consensus and representing a broader range of views, there are also a number of related causes. For example, a vote for AV was positively correlated with support for greater citizen involvement in the political process (Clarke et al., 2013), a stance often advocated by the post-materialist left. Also, campaigns by the business community against MMP in New Zealand, due to concern over its impact on the stability of economic policy (Levine and Roberts, 1994), may have connected ideological positions and electoral system preferences in voters’ minds. We believe these explanations can be applicable to other cases of electoral system referendums beyond the specific contexts of Britain and New Zealand.

Appendix A: Variable coding

**BES: AV referendum survey**

Referendum vote: 1 = keep first-past-the-post; 2 = adopt alternative vote (AV)

Party identification: 1 = Conservative or Labour; 0.5 = none; 0 = all other parties

Winner/loser status: 1 = voted for Conservative or Liberal Democrats in the 2010 election; 0 = voted for all other parties

---

Economic evaluation: 1 = got a lot worse over the past year; 5 = got a lot better
Political efficacy: 0 = no influence on politics; 10 = great influence on politics
Democratic satisfaction: 1 = very satisfied; 4 = very dissatisfied
Political knowledge: additive scale on eight questions (party/leader positions on AV, poll closing hour, franchise of Commonwealth citizens, turnout threshold, postal vote) where 1 = correct answer; 0 = incorrect
Cabinet type preference: 1 = coalition government very bad; 5 = coalition government very good

**NZES: 2011 Election survey**

Referendum vote: 1 = keep MMP; 2 = replace MMP
Party identification: 1 = National or Labour; 0.5 = none; 0 = all other parties
Winner/loser status: 1 = voted for National, United Future, ACT or Maori in the 2008 Election; 0 = voted for all other parties
Economic evaluation: 1 = got a lot better in the past 12 months; 5 = got a lot worse
Political efficacy: 1 = strongly agree that citizens have no say in what government does; 5 = strongly disagree
Democratic satisfaction: 1 = very satisfied; 4 = not at all satisfied
Political knowledge: five-point scale with higher score denoting greater knowledge
Cabinet type preference: 1 = prefer single party; 2 = prefer more than one party

**References**


Influences on Citizens’ Electoral System Preferences


