

New Zealand's democracy and elections – resources for journalists

This resources list has been developed by the Electoral Commission for trainee and working journalists. It introduces general sources describing New Zealand's democracy and their potential usefulness to journalists. A reading list focused on the new journalism unit standards (particularly [23108 Current Affairs](#) and [23109 Local Government](#)) is provided at the end.

Elections New Zealand - www.elections.org.nz

This extensive website is the primary communications and publishing platform of New Zealand's electoral agencies. Almost all the information that a journalists will need about the operation of New Zealand's electoral systems will be accessible on, or via, this site.

Two general resources on the website will be particularly useful:

[Taking Part](#) explains how decisions are made in New Zealand and how New Zealanders can help shape them by having their say, and also offers practical advice on doing so. Working through this introductory resource will introduce all the main processes and players in central and local government decision-making. Consider the opportunities for public involvement and opportunities for the news media to report on, or participate, in the processes. Taking Part is a must for trainee and beginning journalists, and handy revision for others. It's also a good place to point members of the public wanting to push an issue.

[Democracy - everyday concepts](#) has been written by two political scientists with the intention of giving theoretical background to anyone interested in how representative democracy works. It is likely to be very useful for journalists (including leader writers and commentators) examining or attempting to explain current events or issues. Spend a few minutes previewing this resource and what it covers, and return to it later if you want the depth, or to relate the practice described in other sources to the theory this resource contains. Journalists new to a politics round or to the press gallery should include this resource in their induction study.

Other websites

There are a range of websites that help describe and demonstrate the operation of New Zealand's democracy. Spend a little time on each website, to familiarise yourself with what each organisation is responsible for, how it relates to others, and the range of information resources available which may be useful to a journalist. The descriptions given below are generally taken or based on how each website or organisation describes itself.

Head of State

[The Governor-General of New Zealand](#) describes the role and functions of the post (including constitutional matters), as well as providing detail on the incumbent and their work.

Parliament

[Parliament](#) is where our elected representatives make laws, debate important issues and keep a watch on Government activity. Including: how parliament works, parliamentary business, select committees, MPs and parties, this week in parliament, publications and research, have your say, visiting, history and buildings, education, explore parliament, administration. Educational facts sheets, select committee reports and other public records (including Order Papers, Questions and Hansard), MPs profiles, and electorate profiles etc are among a diverse and extensive range of materials.

[New Zealand Legislation](#) provides free public access to New Zealand statutes (Public, Local, and Private Acts) and Statutory Regulations. Take a moment to familiarise yourself with the options for navigating through this site and within an Act. There's a useful [guide](#).

[The Press Gallery](#)

The Government

[The official website of the New Zealand Government](#) provides latest releases and speeches and other material produced by ministers. An archive off the bottom of the home page contains material of previous administrations back to 1993.

The [Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet](#) co-ordinates Cabinet processes and provides non-partisan policy advice to the Prime Minister. It publishes the Cabinet Manual which sets out constitutional conventions, procedures and rules of Cabinet and central executive government (eg, government formation, caretaker convention, etc); and the CabGuide detailing administrative procedures. DPMC includes the Honours Secretariat, External Assessments Bureau, and the Domestic & External Security Group.

The [State Services Commission](#) is "the Government's lead advisor on New Zealand's public management system". It "works with Public Service departments, Crown entities and other State sector organisations to ensure the New Zealand government operates efficiently and effectively". The State Services Commissioner's statutory roles are to appoint and manage Public Service chief executives, provide leadership across the State Services, investigate and report on matters relating to the performance of the Public Service departments, provide guidance on integrity and conduct to State servants, and promote, develop, and monitor equal employment opportunities policies and programmes for the Public Service. It also leads New Zealand's e-government programme. The website has both current guidance and contextual material.

The [Treasury](#) is "the Government's lead advisor on economic and financial policy, and has the overall vision of helping governments achieve higher living standards for New Zealanders". The site "contains a wealth of information on various aspects of the Treasury's work, including Budget and forecast information, public sector management and Treasury publications".

[newzealand.govt.nz](#) is the portal to state sector agencies and services online, including information relevant to different life events, opportunities to participate in Government, information for Māori, and about New Zealand.

The Courts

[Courts of New Zealand](#) provides information about the role, history and structure of the courts, and it provides sitting calendars and case summaries with help for the media in using this information.

- The [Office of the Judicial Conduct Commissioner](#) was established in August 2005 to deal with complaints about the conduct of Judges. However, the Judicial Conduct Commissioner cannot challenge the legality or correctness of a Judge's decision in relation to any legal proceedings.

Local government

www.localcouncils.govt.nz is provided by the Department of Internal Affairs which is responsible for local government policy matters and supports the Minister of Local Government. The local councils website has map-based links to councils' websites, information on how local government works, the ways in which people can participate, and about local government elections. The links and resources sections are useful.

The [Local Government Commission](#) is an independent body. Its main jobs involve considering council boundaries and mergers, and the number and structure of councillors for a council. It has also been reviewing the operation of local government legislation and elections.

[Local Government New Zealand](#) is the non-governmental organisation that represents the national interests of all 85 councils of New Zealand. It is concerned with best practice in the local government sector, and provides policy, advice and training to councils.

The [Society of Local Government Managers](#) is a professional association for its member managers, and offers extensive training and resources.

Statutory watchdogs

A number of independent watchdogs keep an eye on the conduct of the Government and its agencies including:

- [The Ombudsmen](#) investigate complaints about the administrative acts and decisions of central and local government agencies, including on requests for official information, and helps people who wish to report serious wrong-doing in their workplace ("whistle-blowing"). The Ombudsmen are Officers of Parliament, and report directly to it.
- [The Controller and Auditor-General](#) "gives Parliament independent assurance over the performance and accountability of public organisations". All public sector organisations are audited to ensure they are doing what they are funded for in the right way, while the office also issues guidance and conducts specific or general inquiries.
- [The Waitangi Tribunal](#) is "a permanent commission of inquiry charged with making recommendations on claims brought by Maori relating to actions or omissions of the Crown that breach the promises made in the Treaty of Waitangi".
- [Human Rights Commission](#) "champions fundamental human rights as a framework for a fair and just society for all the people of New Zealand". Among its wide-ranging work it considers draft legislation and investigates complaints against government agencies.
- [The Privacy Commissioner](#) administers the Privacy Act which applies to almost every person, business or organisation in New Zealand. The office has a wide range of functions, including: investigating complaints about breaches of privacy, running education programmes, and examining proposed legislation and how it may affect individual privacy.
- [The Health and Disability Commissioner](#) is an independent agency set up to: promote and protect the rights of consumers who use health and disability services; help resolve problems between consumers and providers of health and disability services; and improve the quality of health care and disability services. The Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights applies to all health and disability services in New Zealand, including those provided by District Health Boards and other government agencies.

- [Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment](#) aims to maintain and improve the quality of New Zealand's environment. As an independent Officer of Parliament, the PCE has wide-ranging powers to investigate environmental concerns.
- The Inspector-General of Security and Intelligence is able to receive complaints and investigate the work of the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service and the Government Communications Security Bureau.
- The Remuneration Authority is an independent body which sets the salaries and allowances for a wide range of senior elected and appointed public officials, including Members of Parliament, local councillors, and central and local government chief executives.

Other online sources

[Archives New Zealand](#), the [Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#), and the [National Library of New Zealand](#), the [Politics and Government](#) section of New Zealand History online, and [Te Ara – the encyclopedia of New Zealand](#) are all useful sources of historical, contemporary, and contextual information for current issues – and a lot of it is online.

Key reference books

[Adventures in Democracy – A history of the vote in New Zealand](#)

By Neill Atkinson, University of Otago Press (and the Electoral Commission with the assistance of the Ministry of Culture and Heritage), 2003, ISBN 1 877276 58 8

“This is the first comprehensive history of the vote and elections in New Zealand and was published to mark the 150th anniversary of elections in New Zealand.” - Otago University Press website

[Bridled Power: New Zealand's Constitution and Government, fourth edition.](#)

By Geoffrey Palmer and Matthew Palmer, Oxford University Press, 2004, ISBN 0 19 558463 5

“Bridled Power, and its predecessor Unbridled Power, have provided a guide to New Zealand's constitutional system for more than 20 years. This new edition is updated to reflect New Zealand's experience of the MMP system of proportional representation and includes:

- Elections and formation of governments
 - The Governor-General and prospects of becoming a republic
 - How Executive Government works, and should work
 - How Parliament works, and should work
 - How laws are made
 - The checks on government, including the Treaty of Waitangi”
- OUP website

[Electoral Law in New Zealand – Practice and Policy](#)

By Andrew Geddis, LexisNexis, 2007, ISBN 978 0 408 71836 3

“Electoral Law in New Zealand: Practice and Policy provides a close examination of the legal rules and regulations that govern New Zealand’s electoral process from the calling of a general parliamentary election through to the resolution of disputes over its outcome.” - LexisNexis website

[New Zealand Government & Politics, fourth edition](#)

Edited by Raymond Miller, Oxford University Press, 2006, ISBN 0 19 558492 9

“New Zealand Government and Politics, now in its fourth edition, is the leading undergraduate textbook for students of New Zealand political science. It provides an overview of the context, key institutions and processes, written by leading academics and non-academics...”- OUP website

[The Baubles of Office – the New Zealand general election of 2005](#)

Edited by Stephen Levine & Nigel S Roberts, Victoria University Press, 2007, ISBN 978 0 86473 539 3

“*The Baubles of Office* is the story of a cliff-hanger election, New Zealand’s closest yet under MMP... The contributors to this book include political party strategists from all of the parties elected to Parliament... includes a special DVD containing a package of the campaign’s audio-visual highlights...televised party leaders’ debates as well as the leaders’ opening night campaign addresses... parties’ advertising and marketing strategies, with excerpts from TV ads from the 1999 and 2002 campaigns as well as from 2005...many of the party billboards used during the campaign...” – VUP website

Journalism unit standards reading list

This table points to key readings relating to the topic areas highlighted in the new journalism unit standards (particularly [23108 Current Affairs](#) and [23109 Local Government](#)). Bolded items are suggested as essential readings.

| | Political parties | Elections, participation , efficacy | Parliament, government, policy processes | Local government | Lobby groups (third parties), news media, public opinion |
|--|---|---|---|--|--|
| Elections NZ website www.elections.org.nz | Registration and compliance, register including links to parties | Much of site, particularly enrolling, voting & MMP, Election rules, History of the Vote , Research and teaching centre | - | - | Third parties , Election rules, Research and teaching centre, Media centre |
| - Taking Part (Taking Part is a good | - | Important decisions you can | Decisions and laws of | Decisions and rules for where you | Express yourself - ways for |

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| introduction but should be supplemented at diploma or degree level study.) | | make - enrolling and voting | the country | live | having your say and being heard |
| - Democracy - everyday concepts | Political choice | Popular control and political equality, Free and fair elections | Foundations of democratic society, Representative democracy | - | Political choice |
| - Elect! | Political parties | Types of elections | - | - | News media Campaign by lobby and interest groups |
| New Zealand Government & Politics, fourth edition Edited by Raymond Miller, Oxford University Press, 2006, ISBN 0 19 558492 9 | 5.0 Parties | 7.1 Public participation 7.5 Participation and citizenship | Part E Policy Process 8.1 The Policy Process | 3.7 Local Government | 6.0 Media 7.2 Interest Groups |
| Bridled Power: New Zealand's Constitution and Government, fourth edition. By Geoffrey Palmer and Matthew Palmer, Oxford University Press, 2004, ISBN 0 19 558463 5 | - | 2 Elections | 1 New Zealand's System of Government 3 Forming and Ending Governments Part II Executive Government Part III Parliament | 13 Local Government | 12 Public Opinion and Information |
| Other websites | Register of political parties links to parties' websites | Parliament and the general election | How Parliament works Publications about Parliament The Cabinet Manual New Zealand's State Services Public finance overviews Roles and functions of the Governor-General | www.localcouncils.govt.nz Local Government NZ | CommunityNet Aotearoa |