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Does Māori Representation Matter?: An Analysis of the Relationship between Māori Descriptive and Substantive Political Representation in Parliament and Local Government

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the relationship between Māori descriptive and substantive political representation in New Zealand's parliament and local government. The 1993 parliamentary electoral reforms and optional changes to the structure of local body elections in 2001-02 aimed, in part, to help increase Māori descriptive representation. The overall number of elected Māori representatives in parliament has grown, and the proportion of Māori representatives in local government could increase should electoral reforms be implemented. Consequently, arguments based on democratic justice and equality for ensuring an adequate Māori political presence are being superseded by questions of who Māori MPs and Māori local councillors represent, and whether these representatives are making a difference in politics. This study examines the extent to which elected Māori representatives feel a specific responsibility to represent Māori and the ways Māori substantive representation is manifested. It also considers how institutional arrangements and attitudinal factors constrain or facilitate the promotion of Māori interests. This thesis presents case study analyses of Māori substantive representation based on in-depth interviews with elected Māori representatives. It is supported by an examination of three specific issues relevant to parliament, to help demonstrate how Māori MPs react and respond to issues of importance to Māori.

The evidence suggests elected Māori representatives generally feel a specific responsibility to act for Māori interests within and outside their electorate’s geographic boundaries. The data demonstrates that whakapapa influences the perceptions elected Māori representatives have of their role in terms of substantive activities and style of politics. However, electoral system influences, political party practices, the type of representation provided by Māori, the proportion of Māori actually elected to a governing body and non-Māori attitudes to Māori issues, are salient to Māori substantive representation because they mediate the role of the representative. While the relationship between ‘standing for’ Māori and ‘acting for’ Māori interests is not directly correlated, this thesis suggests elected Māori representatives largely do promote Māori interests. Māori ethnicity influences the role of Māori MPs and councillors. Thus, Māori representation matters. This research adds to current understandings of the nature of Māori political representation and of New Zealand’s representative democracy.
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