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Electoral Review Consultation
Independent Electoral Review
Email: secretariat@electoralreview.govt.nz

RURAL WOMEN NEW ZEALAND (INC) SUBMISSION

Electoral Review - Consultation Document

Introduction

Rural Women New Zealand welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Independent Electoral Review Panel. As an organisation dedicated to strengthening, supporting and connecting people and communities in rural and regional New Zealand, we have focussed predominantly on the issues raised in Part 2 of the consultation document regarding voting, particularly voting in elections and removing barriers to participation including during times of emergency and disruption.

Comments

General

1. Our members who participated in our survey regarding this consultation all identified as regular voters. All those responding identified themselves as voters who vote at every general election. The majority of responses were received from our more senior members with 59% aged over 65 years.

Part Two – Voting

2. Most respondents considered that two-three weeks was the most suitable timeframe for advance voting with two weeks considered sufficient in most cases though there was some support for more time to provide flexibility.

3. Generally, it was considered that during voting periods, polling booths provided good accessibility. There was support for evening and weekend hours for those with childcare and work responsibilities that made “working hours” difficult.
4. In most cases, people were within 30 minutes’ drive of a polling booth with 10% between 30 minutes and an hour and a small number needing to travel one to two hours. Most people found polling booths easily accessible.
5. Mainstream media and post remain the main means of accessing public information about voting with social media also playing an important role. There was general agreement that information about voting methods and where to find polling booths was well publicised and easily accessible.
6. In addition to print, broadcast and digital media, posted information and social media, face to face meetings with candidates were considered a valuable way for people to inform themselves in the run up to an election, Comment was made regarding the role organisations like ours play in hosting “meet the candidates” events to allow voters to meet the range of candidates in a neutral setting.
7. Although outside the scope of the review, a small number of survey respondents identified digital or online voting as a change that should be considered.

Emergencies and Disruption

8. With regard to emergencies and disruption, the current provisions were noted as useful and other suggestions were made to support participation. Suggestions included:
 - the capacity to extend the voting period for up to a week
 - providing a secure online special voting option
 - provision and focus on accessibility including shuttle services or mobile polling stations when emergency or disruption was localised rather than national.

Part 4 Electoral Commission and Representation Commission

Electorate Boundaries

9. In response to question 4.3 of the consultation document, there was some support for smaller rural electorates e.g., “people should be in electorates in their normal social and shopping areas.”

10. There was some concern that some rural and regional electorate areas are too large geographically for a Member of Parliament to service and represent adequately and that population should not be the sole criteria. The size of the Tasman Electorate was given as an example of this.
11. Consideration needs to be given to a voter's local service hub and where voters naturally align.
12. An alternative view was that stability of electorates helps with local issues and engagement and that constituents disengage when there are continual changes of boundaries.

Disinformation and Misinformation

13. The majority of our respondents considered there was a risk of disinformation or misinformation. The main concerns related to social media. A range of suggestions were made regarding how this risk could be reduced. These included:
 - Tighter social media laws and monitoring particularly of hate speech
 - Continued education through a variety of media
 - Unbiased reporting and checks and balances to encourage this
 - More positive, rational messages from Government Departments and recognised national bodies such as Rural Women New Zealand
 - Accountability measures where there is proof of misinformation
 - Use of an election ombudsman or monitoring service
14. Countering this, there was concern expressed by some that free speech may be eroded if additional measures were put in place and that the public should be left to make up their own minds.

Conclusion

15. Generally our members consider the current system provides adequate flexibility with regard to voting. There is support for flexibility to be provided in times of emergency and disruption and for additional resource to be available for local "workarounds" in times of a local rather than a national adverse event.
16. Several comments were made, and we have also experienced this as an organisation, of the difficulties of relying on the postal service as a reliable way in which to provide information when there are time constraints.
17. Although outside the scope of this review, digital or online voting was raised as a potential tool for the future.

18. Several respondents noted the role of civil society organisations such as ours in disseminating impartial information and providing neutral options for engagement with candidates.
19. There was support for electoral boundaries that align voters to their local service centre/community base.
20. We note that our most engaged audience with this review was older voters who vote regularly and are engaged with the electoral system.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this consultation and we look forward to engaging further when the panel releases draft recommendations.

About Rural Women New Zealand

Rural Women New Zealand (RWNZ) is a not-for-profit, member-based organisation that reaches into all rural communities and has an authoritative voice on rural environment, health, education, technology, business and social issues.

RWNZ strives to ensure that all rural residents, workers and families have equitable access to services, inequalities are addressed by Government, and the wellbeing of rural communities is considered from the beginning of all policy and legislative development.

RWNZ is affiliated to the Associated Country Women of the World and as such upholds all United Nations, ILO, FAO and WHO conventions and outcome statements as they relate to women and rural women in particular.

Nāku iti noa, nā



Gabrielle O'Brien
Chief Executive