Cultural Identity and Maori Nationalism: Adapting the Franchise to Effect Cultural, Political and Economic Change for the Indigenous Peoples of New Zealand

The indigenous peoples of New Zealand signed a treaty with British colonisers in 1840 and lost their sovereignty and ownership of lands, fisheries, forests and natural resources. However Article Three of the Treaty of Waitangi guaranteed Maori rights of equal citizenship thereby providing Maori with the right to the franchise since 1840. Initially eligibility rights effectively excluded their democratic right to participate but in 1867 it became politically expedient to provide Maori with separate parliamentary representation. This unique feature of the New Zealand electoral system has been retained through to the present day. For more than seventy years the Maori franchise had little impact but following the depression years of the 1930s Maori successfully used the franchise to effect beneficial welfare changes. However it was not a tool that provided Maori with access to political power until changes were made to the electoral system in 1996. Today all political parties are courting the Maori vote and Maori are now using the electoral system to further their self-determining goals of tino rangatiratanga (Maori control over their cultural, social and economic development). This paper will discuss how the Maori franchise had been used in their struggle to hold on to their culture, retain their language, gain economic influence and develop a strong sense of Maori identity and nationhood.

Ann Sullivan
Dept. of Political Science and Public Policy
University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton
New Zealand
a.sullivan@waikato.ac.nz