

THE POPULIST EXCEPTION? THE 2017 NEW ZEALAND GENERAL ELECTION

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The 2017 New Zealand general election (23 September) occurred at a time when the global political landscape was being profoundly shaped by growing ideological polarisation and volatility in electoral politics. Only a year had passed since the contentious Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. In fact, New Zealand's general and Germany's federal elections were held on the same weekend. In Germany, the radical right *Alternative für Deutschland* made an electoral breakthrough, at the expense of the mainstream centre-left (Social Democratic Party of Germany) and centre-right (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union) parties, although the vote shifts were not sufficient to significantly disrupt the party system. It is not surprising that many have been tempted to interpret New Zealand's election results both within this international political context and through the lens of the rise of right-wing and authoritarian populism. Indeed, the formation of a coalition government that includes a party widely described as populist—the New Zealand First Party—prompted one commentator to argue that the 'far-right' had 'seized power' in New Zealand (Mack, 2017).

It is not difficult to rebut a claim that New Zealand acts as a simple mirror of recent 'populist politics' patterns seen elsewhere. However, other assertions warrant more scrutiny. Some have posited the existence of a distinctive 'Antipodean' form of populism (Moffitt, 2017). Others have made the case that New Zealand is a 'populist exception', bucking the international trend in favour of some form of electorally moderate 'politics

as usual'. However, there is also a sense that New Zealand's own history contains examples of populism, although past episodes have perhaps acted as some form of inoculation. Crucially, what is this phenomenon called populism—do we (and how do we) know it when we see it?

Using data from the 2017 New Zealand Election Study (NZES), this book seeks to answer those questions. The goals are twofold: (1) to situate New Zealand's 2017 election in a contemporary international context in which there is particular concern about the rise of so-called populist politics and (2) to analyse the political attitudes and preferences of New Zealanders in 2017 to identify and further interpret longer-term patterns in New Zealand politics that are made possible by this 10th iteration of the NZES. The former task is made possible by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), to which the NZES contributes data, and includes questions (designed to elicit populist attitudes) that have been asked of citizens by election studies in a range of advanced democracies (CSES, 2016). The chapters in this book explore and critique such questions on populism (and those theories that lie behind them), seeking to uncover the nature of populism and associated attitudinal dimensions in New Zealand.

New Zealand offers a relevant case to study because historians and political scientists broadly agree that the country's political culture contains strong traditions of both populism and authoritarianism. At first glance, New Zealand's exceptionalism might seem unexpected. International scholarship frequently identifies New Zealand First as the standard-bearer of populist politics in New Zealand; however, populist and authoritarian support for other parties is also observable. Meanwhile, the changing nature of New Zealand society complicates a simple application of populist theory, as exemplified by increasing recognition of the Treaty rights of the indigenous Māori population, the existence of designated Māori parliamentary representation¹ and the increasing diversity of the New Zealand population following recent high levels of net immigration.

The 2017 election provides an appropriate case to examine populism in New Zealand because, following coalition negotiations, the apparently populist New Zealand First Party entered into government with the

1 For the 2017 election, there were seven Māori seats of 71 electorate seats in parliament, the boundaries of which overlie the 'general' electorates. Persons of Māori descent can choose either the general or Māori roll—the number that choose the Māori option determines the number of seats assigned.

Labour Party. In a broader context, the 2017 election was both won and lost by the party defending its record in office since 2008—the centre-right New Zealand National Party (Vowles, 2018). National won the most votes; however, they lost the battle over government formation to a coalition comprised of the Labour and New Zealand First parties, with the support of the Green Party. The outcome was unexpected for several reasons. First, the Labour Party had been languishing in opinion polls, with only approximately 24 per cent support for several months prior to the election. Second, just over seven weeks before election day, on 1 August 2017, Labour unanimously voted to change its leader. Leadership changes so close to an election are unusual in New Zealand politics. Labour's new leader, Jacinda Ardern, was young, feminist and identified herself as a politically progressive social democrat. She rapidly acquired a high level of public popularity, taking Labour to a party vote of 37 per cent at the election and, therefore, the potential core of a coalition. The second surprise occurred on 19 October, when New Zealand First party leader Winston Peters announced that he would form a government with Labour, citing the need for capitalism to 'regain ... its human face' as having influenced his approach to the negotiations (Peters, 2017). The Green Party provided the new government with support on confidence and supply. Jacinda Ardern became prime minister and Winston Peters her deputy. New Zealand First members of parliament took four seats in the 20-member Cabinet and the Greens received three ministerial positions outside of Cabinet. This was the first time in the history of the mixed member proportional system (since 1996) that a party with the second-most votes gained the position of leading a government.

Reactions to the new coalition arrangements were mixed. Some were shocked, believing that the centre-right had been robbed (Winston Peters settles for stardust, 2017). *The Australian* mocked the result with the headline 'Shock in New Zealand as losers take power'. The author of this article suggested that it was a 'vanilla election' ending with a 'bitter aftertaste', while decrying the 'rise of celebrity politicians, the fall of good governments and the terror of the populists' (Sheridan, 2017). Others claimed that a 'nicer, kinder and better NZ' could be expected and that having Ardern as prime minister would be 'profound' for young women (Radio New Zealand, 2017).

Jacinda Ardern was widely recognised as being of the same progressive mould as Canada's Justin Trudeau or France's Emmanuel Macron. However, unlike these two leaders, hers was not a single-party government; therefore,

there arose inevitable predictions of the difficulties and potentially dire consequences that lay ahead. Both the Labour and Green parties were criticised for their willingness to work with New Zealand First, given its populist bent. However, this was not the first time that New Zealand First had served in government. The party had been in coalition with the National Party between 1996 and 1998 and had supported Helen Clark's Labour Government between 2005 and 2008. The key difference in 2017 was the breadth of ideologies and policy commitments folded into the new government's agenda and the extent to which New Zealand First was a key player.

While it might be natural to see New Zealand First's centrality to this outcome as an example of populism on the rise, we argue that the case of New Zealand reveals that populism need not be associated with authoritarianism, nor necessarily with the 'radical right'. Our examination of both the historical and contemporary contexts demonstrates that, at least in elite-level politics, both populism and authoritarianism are currently relatively weak in New Zealand. This does not render the country immune to populist rhetoric (both inclusive and exclusive); nor does it preclude the emergence of a cultural and generational backlash (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Indeed, some commentators viewed the 2017 election as one fought along generational battle lines, on both material and post-material issues (Shadwell, 2017).

In this volume, we draw on original data from the NZES to examine the results of the 2017 election and the extent to which they support the claim that New Zealand is indeed a populist exception. In Chapter 1, we begin by revisiting international definitions of populism and examining their relevance to New Zealand. We conclude by identifying selected historical occurrences of populism in New Zealand's political system and political culture and discussing factors that complicate the application of populism to the case of New Zealand.

Chapter 2 probes more deeply into the background of the 2017 election, comparing the results with those of 2014 and examining the pattern of vote shifts between the two elections and the changes in issue salience that shaped the outcome. It compares the level of vote volatility and the size of the party system with data from other OECD democracies and examines the social and demographic correlates of vote choice.

Chapter 3 outlines how we have measured and operationalised the concept of populism in relation to public attitudes in New Zealand. Questions derived from the module of questions designed under the auspices of the CSES are discussed and critiqued. We construct alternative scales of populism and authoritarianism from a mixture of items from the CSES and NZES and then examine the extent to which these attitudinal sets are associated with a range of social and demographic variables, including generational age cohorts.

Drawing on the conceptualisation and operationalisation outlined in the early part of the book, Chapters 4–8 provide in-depth analyses of the ways in which populism and authoritarianism played out across various key issues and demographics in the 2017 election. In Chapter 4, we examine the language used by New Zealand's political parties and analyse how populist and authoritarian attitudes are associated with left–right ideological positions, vote choices and satisfaction and support for democracy.

Drawing on time series data, Chapter 5 compares public opinion regarding immigration in New Zealand to that of other countries with comparable immigration experiences. It identifies the specific characteristics of New Zealanders' concerns regarding immigration (by party preferences), asking how closely these opinions and preferences mirror the European and American experience with anti-immigrant populism.

Chapter 6 focuses on the 'gender factor' in the 2017 election, beginning with an examination of Jacinda Ardern's political rhetoric of hope and positivity, as opposed to fear and division, and the emotional and attitudinal effects that this generated. Further, it investigates the gender gap in vote choice and attitudes to feminist issues that, in a populist moment, possess the potential to result in a cultural backlash.

Chapter 7 discusses the election results among Māori, including analysis of the downfall of the Māori Party and political participation by Māori beyond turnout. It investigates populism and authoritarianism among Māori (compared to non-Māori) through an examination of opinions regarding the Māori electorates and reveals how these have changed over time as a result of the various attempts by conservative politicians to tap into anti-Māori sentiment.

Chapter 8 analyses preferences for either a Labour- or National-led coalition—these were marginally in favour of the latter, thereby creating issues of legitimacy. It also demonstrates that the coalition outcome was closer to the median voter than the centre-right alternatives. Confidence in the principle of coalition government and satisfaction with democracy were only slightly eroded, more among the older than younger population and among authoritarians already uncomfortable with coalitions. Populists, on the other hand, were (and remained) in favour of the principle of coalition government.

We draw the volume to a close by bringing together the substantive findings from each chapter to reinforce our key arguments—that distinguishing between exclusionary and inclusive forms of populism is necessary and invaluable to context-rich research. Through empirical analyses, we demonstrate that inclusive forms of populism can be pluralist in orientation if a leader's rhetorical approach recognises 'the people' as diverse and encompassing. This is not to deny that New Zealand has a history of authoritarian populism, nor do we suggest an absence of authoritarian values among the New Zealand voting public. However, in the 2017 New Zealand general election, the exclusionary populism observable in many parts of the globe was notably absent.

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