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A ‘Team of Five Million’? Covid-19 and the 2020 New Zealand general election

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Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization announced that Covid-19 had proliferated widely around the world. A global pandemic was declared and, in the months that followed, almost everything changed. ‘Normality’, as defined by the immediate past, became a memory to be cherished. Everyday lives, societies, and economies were disrupted. Nowhere were the challenges faced more apparent than in the world of politics and government.

In this book, we examine electoral politics during the crisis in New Zealand—one of a handful of countries that held a national election amid the pandemic. It was also one of the few countries in which the policy response stood out and was remarkably successful. New Zealand’s general election provides an opportunity to gauge the immediate impact of the Covid-19 crisis and the impact of the New Zealand Government’s policy responses on electoral politics and public opinion. While New Zealanders were voting on 17 October 2020, their country had recorded only 25 confirmed Covid deaths in a population of five million people.

A crisis can bring people together or set them apart. By the time of the 2020 election, support for the government's crisis management was at its height. Labour, the leading party in the incumbent coalition government, secured a historic election victory. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern had taken up the metaphor of the New Zealand people as a 'Team of Five Million' facing the Covid-19 threat together. It was an idea that resonated strongly in public opinion; it implied that, in solidarity and through a focus on community, New Zealand could compete successfully to beat the virus in the same vein as a sports team. In the chapters that follow, we seek to explain the success of the government's strategy through an analysis of the election campaign and outcome. We also address the limits of this approach and the extent to which some voters felt alienated from rather than connected with the 'team'.

Our inquiry focuses on those on the front line of the experience, the people of New Zealand, through sample survey research. We draw primarily on data from the 2020 New Zealand Election Study (NZES) to explore the extent to which the idea of a Team of Five Million might have represented a new, more inclusive New Zealand or whether it was a discursive reframing of business-as-usual politics (Vowles et al. 2022). By analysing the responses of 3,730 randomly selected participants, the chapters in this book seek to untangle the themes of collective solidarity and identity, exploring a series of questions in 10 chapters that reveal the value, complexity, but also fragility of notions of unity during a time of crisis. For example, Chapter 9 asks whether the calls for a united response under strong government leadership generated stronger support for greater government leadership and involvement in other policy areas such as climate change. Chapters 4 and 7 discuss how much Ardern's discourse of 'togetherness' and her personal popularity contributed to increased voter turnout and her party's stunning election victory. Indigenous Māori and other groups most vulnerable to Covid-19 were already marginalised by continuing inequality, poverty, and discrimination. Did their voting patterns follow the rest of the Team of Five Million? Chapter 7 discusses an undercurrent of polarisation despite the continued high levels of trust in the government and public institutions. Chapter 6 asks whether sentiments about immigration shifted with border closures and a focus on protecting the country from the world.

To place these questions in context, we use the remainder of this introductory chapter to outline the background to this Covid-19 election, including the main features of the government's policy response. We recap the story from the 2017 election, when Labour won a smaller share of the vote than the centre-right National Party but was able to form a coalition

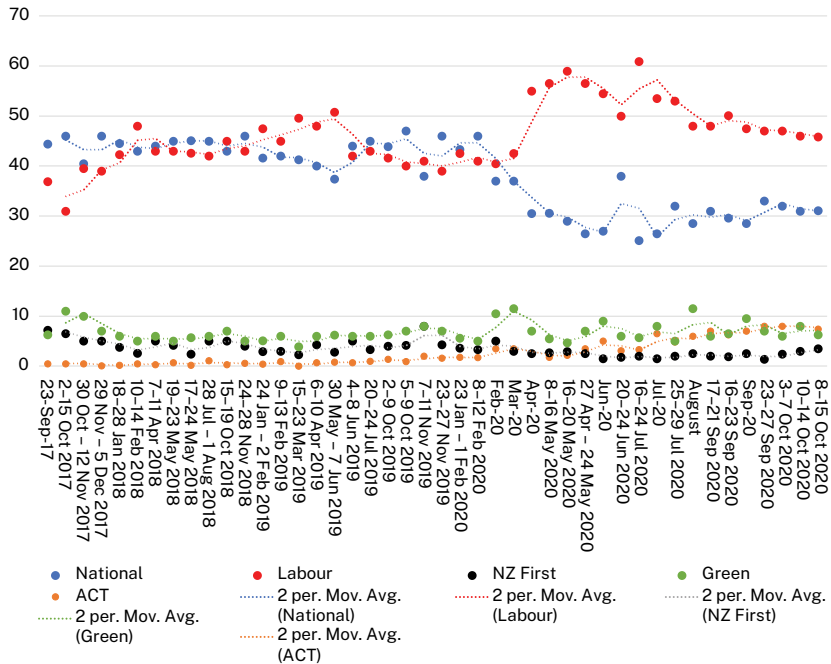
with the populist New Zealand First party. The appearance of Covid-19 drew a clear line between the government's polling performance before and after the crisis. Struggling to retain traction immediately before, Labour began to soar above its competitors in popularity and support in the months that followed the onset of the pandemic. The results of the election are then analysed. Vote shifts between 2017 and 2020 are highlighted, the net effect of which was the biggest in New Zealand's electoral history. We note the significant increase in turnout particularly among younger people. We review the demographic and social foundations of voter choice in 2020. We conclude that the election outcome is best seen as a big swing of New Zealand's electoral pendulum but it did not generate a reset of the party system. Indeed, three years on, the party system looked much as it did before the pandemic. The final section of this introductory chapter offers an overview of the chapters in the remainder of this book.

The background and the crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic is a perfect example of an exogenous shock—that is, an event that came from outside the parameters of normal domestic politics.¹ Covid-19 presented a dual challenge to public health services and the economy. It left many governments to assume initially that a trade-off between the two was required. New Zealand's centre-left coalition government led by Labour Party leader Jacinda Ardern rejected that trade-off, resolving that the best economic response was to protect public health. As Ardern put it in March 2022, looking back over the experience of the previous two years: '[P]utting people's health first was also the strongest economic response' (Ardern 2022). New Zealand pursued an effective 'go hard, go early' elimination strategy. The border was closed to all except citizens, residents, their families, and a few other exceptions and a mandatory two-week custodial quarantine period in a state-managed facility post-arrival was implemented. There was a six-week lockdown from late March into early May 2020—one of the strictest by world standards, as estimated by the Oxford *COVID-19 Government Response Tracker* (BSG 2020–23). Most people deemed the policy response decisive and necessary; others thought it extreme and unnecessary (Curtin and O'Sullivan 2023; Mitchell 2021).

1 By this we mean a shock exogenous to New Zealand's political and party systems, not to the global capitalist economy, within which 'crises' are generated internally from time to time.

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after the 2017 election. By 2020 it was consistently polling below the party vote threshold of 5 per cent necessary for representation under New Zealand's mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral system. Even the Green Party was in danger of dropping below the crucial 5 per cent and out of parliament. National Party strategists hoped the 2020 election would see both of Labour's government allies banished from parliament and National winning the edge in a two-party race. This was more than just their hope; it was a real possibility.

The tight race expected for the forthcoming election was a consequence of the difficulties encountered by the coalition government. Most of those involved did not anticipate its formation. Before the 2017 election, Labour did not expect to be in a position to win or rule. Its appointment of Jacinda Ardern as leader only weeks before the election paid off in a poll surge that made it a feasible government *formateur* after the election, but National still gained more votes than Labour (Vowles and Curtin 2020).

While there were some policy synergies between New Zealand First and Labour, there were also big differences. The exclusion of the Green Party from Cabinet was at the behest of New Zealand First and reflected longstanding tensions between the two parties. Under-researched and overambitious Labour Party promises developed while in opposition meant there were inevitable difficulties in delivery. For example, Labour aimed to build 100,000 houses for sale over 10 years from 2018, but its program failed to take off and, by early 2020, the target was abandoned (Cooke 2019a; Church 2019; Small 2019). Labour also promised to set up light rail from central Auckland to the city's airport, but a combination of uncertainty about options and lukewarm support from New Zealand First meant there had been no progress at all by the 2020 election. That said, progress was made on the minimum wage, pay equity, and child poverty, with the last mandated as part of the budget process (Curtin 2020).

New Zealand First resistance also stood in the way of the stronger action on climate change and reform of employment law that the Labour and Green parties would have implemented if they had been able to govern without their more conservative partner. However, Jacinda Ardern's popularity remained the Labour Party's strongest grounds for hope of re-election in 2020. Her leadership and communication skills were further demonstrated by her response to an attack on Muslim worshippers in Christchurch. She coined the phrase 'they are us' to channel the country's support and sympathy for those who died or were injured and their families. Covid-19 and the

government's response to it swung the balance of political preferences to Labour. Ardern and her government's handling of Covid-19 was adept. The evocative phrase the Team of Five Million underpinned the idea of a strong collective effort to fight the virus. Particularly during the lockdowns, her televised afternoon press conferences with the Director-General of Health were widely watched (Beattie and Priestly 2021; Grieve 2020). Valuable for mobilising the collective response, they had the effect of overshadowing whatever the National and ACT parties might do to attract public attention.

While not everyone was impressed, the dissenters formed a small minority. The government faced a huge challenge in setting up contact-tracing systems, effective enforcement of border controls, and the establishment of quarantine facilities in hotels not designed for the purpose. Implementation of government priorities was often slow to reach the front line. Journalists played a valuable role in drawing attention to flaws in the processes, but some ran the risk of damaging public confidence by excessive alarmism. While it concurred with the broad thrust of the response, the opposition National Party did not always play a constructive role, often setting itself apart from the mood of a collective effort.

Polling support for Labour soared after the lockdown and the near-normal conditions that followed the end of the first outbreak. National Party leader Simon Bridges was often strongly critical of the government (for example, Small 2020). He frequently struck sour notes and failed to gain his party any traction. In May 2020, Bridges's leadership was successfully challenged by his colleague Todd Muller, but Muller succumbed to the pressures of the job only 54 days later. The National Party caucus then elected Judith Collins—the third person to lead the party in less than a year. Meanwhile, a small fringe of the population challenged the severity of the crisis, questioned the need for lockdowns, and ignored social distancing where community cases had been detected. However, their occasional demonstrations and participation in the election campaign were but minor irritants.

After almost 100 days with no community cases during most of the crucial winter months, a community outbreak in August led to a second lockdown in Auckland and a four-week postponement of the scheduled general election. By 17 October, the day of the election, only a handful of community cases remained and, coupled with a high level of advance voting, the administration of the election proceeded smoothly under the required Covid-19 conditions.

The election results

As anticipated—at least by those following the polls since about May 2020—New Zealand voters delivered victory in October to the Labour Party. However, the extent of that victory was much greater than expected, in the form of a historic landslide. When the final count was announced on 6 November, Labour's share of the vote was 50 per cent, giving it 65 of the total 120 seats. The main opposition, the National Party, was decimated, with its vote share falling to 25.6 per cent. Table 1.1 displays the results in detail, comparing them with the previous two elections, in 2014 and 2017.

For several reasons, this outcome represented a significant win for the left in New Zealand. First, it was the largest share of the vote won by the Labour Party in 82 years, second only to its vote share of 55 per cent in 1938. It was the first time a party had won enough seats to form a government alone since New Zealand's first election using the MMP electoral system, in 1996. The trajectory of change is equally remarkable. Labour's 2020 party vote share was double that of its most recent low point in 2014.

Second, there were changes in the minor-party landscape. Labour's coalition partner, the populist New Zealand First party, failed to reach the 5 per cent threshold needed to enter parliament. Although the 7.6 per cent share of the vote for Green was lower than its heyday in 2011, it was a small increase from 2017. The party secured 10 list seats and, in a closely run contest, captured the inner-city electorate of Auckland Central. The latter was a rare win for the Greens, although the party had achieved a similar feat in 1999, narrowly taking the Coromandel electorate in its first attempt to contest an election independently. Very few minor parties can achieve sufficient geographical concentration of the vote to win an electorate seat without an explicit or implicit strategic deal with a major party.

Table 1.1 The 2020, 2017, and 2014 elections: Party votes and seats

	2014		2017		2020	
	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats
Labour Party	25.1	32	36.9	46	50.0	65
National Party	47.0	60*	44.4	56	25.6	33
Green Party	10.7	14	6.3	8	7.9	10
ACT New Zealand	0.7	1	0.5	1	7.6	10
New Zealand First (NZF)	8.7	11	7.2	9	2.6	0
(New) Conservative Party (CONS)**	4.0	0	0.2	0	1.5	0
The Opportunities Party (TOP)	n.a.	n.a.	2.4	0	1.5	0
Māori Party	1.3	2	1.2	0	1.2	2
Aotearoa Legalise Cannabis Party	0.5	0	0.3	0	0.5	0
Mana Party***	1.4	0	0.1	0	n.a.	n.a.
Ban1080	0.2	0	0.1	0	n.a.	n.a.
Advance NZ****	n.a.	n.a.	0.1	0	1.0	0
United Future (UF)	0.2	1	0.1	0	n.a.	n.a.
NZ Outdoors Party	n.a.	n.a.	0.1	0	0.1	0
(Democrats for) Social Credit	0.1	0	0	0	0.1	0
Others	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0.6	0
Total		121		120		120
Left (Labour, Green, MANA, Māori [2020])	37.2	46	43.3	54	59.1	77
Right (National, ACT, CONS)	51.7	61	45.1	57	34.7	43
Centre (NZF, Māori [2014, 2017], TOP, UF)	10.2	14	10.9	9	4.1	0
Others	0.8	0	0.6	0	2.1	0

* National lost the Northland electorate seat to New Zealand First at a by-election early in 2015, bringing it down to 59 seats.

** The Conservative Party had added 'New' to its name by 2020.

*** Allied with the Internet Party in 2014.

**** The New Zealand People's Party contested the 2017 election and formed an alliance with Advance NZ in 2020 under the latter's name.

Note: n.a. not applicable.

Sources: Electoral Commission (2014, 2017, 2020).

Meanwhile, on the centre-right and right, National's decline was partly offset by the rise of ACT New Zealand, which won nearly 8 per cent of the party vote—its best performance in both seats and votes since its formation in 1994. Leader David Seymour had been its only MP since 2014, representing the Auckland blue-ribbon seat of Epsom, which was effectively gifted to him by an informal arrangement with the National Party. In recent elections, National has campaigned only for the party vote in the electorate, signalling its supporters to vote strategically for the local ACT candidate in the hope of boosting the centre-right seat count. But not since 2008 had ACT gained enough of the party vote to gain the extra seats beneath the party vote threshold that this electorate seat would have mandated. The 10 seats ACT won in 2020 put it back on the electoral map in its own right. Together, National and ACT won 35 per cent of the party votes—a low point for the centre-right in recent New Zealand politics, although not as low as the combined National and ACT New Zealand votes in 2002 (28 per cent).

Alongside this, the Māori Party made a comeback. An effective campaign from the Labour Party for the Māori electorates, paired with a gradual decline in support, had ousted the Māori Party from parliament in 2017. The Māori Party had provided support for the National government between 2008 and 2017—an arrangement of which many Māori increasingly had come to disapprove. In 2020, the party recovered by winning one of the seven Māori electorates from Labour. Its 1.2 per cent share of the party vote was almost the same as its party vote share in 2017—enough to give the Māori Party a second MP from its party list. Across the seven Māori electorates, the party's electorate vote performance was up by 6 per cent, but much of this increase came from the disappearance of the Mana Party that had run in Te Tai Tokerau in 2017, the Māori Party having then stood aside there. Indeed, the Māori Party electorate vote in 2020 was only a whisker more than the Māori Party/Mana combined vote in 2017. The Māori Party won Waiariki on much the same vote share it had in 2017. It was a 10 percentage point Labour vote collapse in that electorate that produced the Māori Party victory—an outcome that was labelled 'stunning' (Maxwell 2020). The two new MPs, Rawiri Waititi and Debbie Ngarewa-Packer, quickly went on to make their mark in parliament.

In summary, the magnitude of Labour's win cannot be underestimated. In addition, when combining the vote for the Labour, Green, and Māori parties, the result indicates that 59.1 per cent of voters opted for the 'left', translating to 64 per cent of parliamentary seats. The 2020 election recorded the biggest net vote shift in a New Zealand election for more than a century (Vowles 2020a).



Figure 1.2 Word cloud of issues in the 2020 election

Source: 2020 NZES (Vowles et al. 2022).

Driven by its management of the pandemic, the related issues of health and wellbeing, and the economy, Labour had won a substantial victory. Analysis of the NZES shows Covid-19 loomed the largest in the open-ended responses to the question ‘What is the most important issue for you in the 2020 Election?’. The word cloud in Figure 1.2 displays visually the distribution of responses.² Nearly 26 per cent of respondents named Covid-19 or an aspect of it, followed by just over 15 per cent mentioning the economy.

Traditional left–right issues, however, also mattered. In her campaign opening speech, Jacinda Ardern began and ended on the Covid-19 response. She also talked at length about a kind and empathetic government that

² The word cloud in Figure 1.2 is evocative, but because it counts more than one word for each respondent it runs the risk of over-representing respondents who included more words than others. Appendix Table A1.2 is based on manual coding of the single most important issue and confirms little or no bias in the word cloud, and is the basis for the percentage responses reported here.

was responding to the needs of society according to traditional Labour Party values (Ardern 2020). Indeed, 8 per cent of NZES participants mentioned housing, and 5 per cent mentioned the environment. Health was surprisingly low, with only about 3 per cent of participants listing this as the most important issue. One or other of welfare, inequality, and poverty were mentioned by about 6 per cent in total, while 16 per cent did not state an issue of concern. Ardern's speech did not mention Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi), nor did issues specifically defined as Māori register among NZES respondents.

National Party leader Judith Collins's opening speech sought to emphasise the failure of the government to prevent the Auckland outbreak that had postponed the election (Collins 2020). Her narrative emphasised Labour's alleged and real failures to deliver on its promises. Traditional National Party values came to the fore in her support for business and her claims that Labour could not be trusted on tax policy nor in keeping the size and influence of government under control. Among those who identified the economy or taxes as the most important issue, National was still considered the best party to deal with them. But on almost every other issue, and particularly those that were most salient, Labour was well ahead.

Electoral turnout

Meanwhile, turnout among those qualified to vote³ reached its highest in 20 years, and the biggest gains in voter turnout were among those aged under 30, at last bearing out hopes for a 'youthquake' (Edwards 2017; Hall 2018). Turnout had increased in 2017, but enrolment among those aged between 18 and 24 was down (Smith 2017). Thus, in 2017, an apparently healthy increase of 6 per cent of those aged under 30 was based on those who were already on the electoral roll, while the increase was only 2.6 per cent when

3 As the note to Figure 1.1 points out, the data are the percentages of valid votes cast on a base of all those qualified to be enrolled, rather than official turnout, which includes disallowed votes on a base of only those enrolled to vote. An enrolment base for turnout has the perverse effect of failing to acknowledge a turnout increase accompanied by a matching higher level of enrolment, to the point that a turnout increase could be entirely hidden or even estimated as an apparent decline. In the case of 2017, as explained above, the apparent increase for those aged 18–29 on a roll base was much smaller than it appeared after taking enrolment into account. By counting disallowed and informal votes as part of the numerator, persons disallowed because they are not on the roll and therefore not in the denominator distort the estimate, and those casting informal votes—which could have been a protest—are counted as having voted when their votes could not be counted.

based on the number of those eligible to vote by age. In sharp contrast, enrolment in 2020 was substantially higher among those aged under 30, and turnout was higher again.⁴

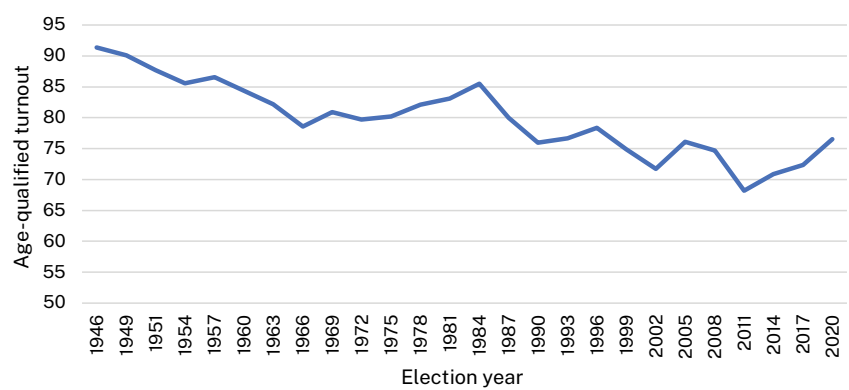


Figure 1.3 Age-eligible turnout in New Zealand, 1946–2020

Note: The data are the percentages of valid votes cast on a base of all those qualified to be enrolled, rather than official turnout, which includes disallowed and informal votes on a base of only those enrolled to vote.

Sources: Nagel (1988); Electoral Commission (2020).

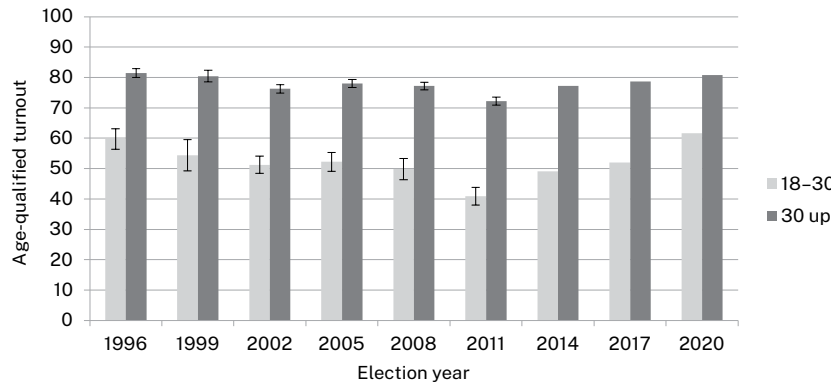


Figure 1.4 Age-eligible turnout by age, 1996–2020

Sources: NZES (1996–2011); New Zealand Electoral Commission (2014–20).

4 Calculations based on data from the Electoral Commission (2014, 2017, 2020) and the comparisons of age-eligible populations and enrolment by age available from the commission.

As Figure 1.3 shows, the increase in turnout has been from a low base as, in 2011, electoral turnout reached an all-time low in New Zealand (Vowles 2014). The trend has since been consistently upward. The post-1996 developments are of particular significance given New Zealand's transition to the MMP system. The expectation that turnout could recover was not initially borne out (Vowles 2010). Part of the reason for continued decline was generational replacement. Earlier generations of voters with stronger habits of voting have been replaced with new generations with weaker habits established well before the electoral system change.

Figure 1.4 shows that the post-2011 turnout increase has, since 2014, been predominantly driven by younger adults. On a qualified-to-vote basis, turnout among those aged 18–29 has increased by 50 per cent since its low point in 2011. A pessimistic narrative of global electoral turnout decline that has captured the literature needs revision, particularly as there have been similar recent recoveries in the United Kingdom and the United States. An in-depth analysis of the potential reasons for this increase in turnout is conducted in Chapter 4.⁵

The vote shifts

As noted, the 2020 election produced a net shift of votes between parties that was the greatest in New Zealand's electoral history (Vowles 2020b).⁶ However, below the surface there are always much greater movements as individuals go with or against the main currents (also see Vowles 2020c). Appendix Table A1.3 provides an estimate of the total vote flows between the two elections, including flows in and out of nonvoting. It is derived from a weighted cross-tabulation of data from the Vote Compass post-election sample of just over 26,000 people. Of most interest are the flows of votes away from National and New Zealand First, followed by the flows to Labour.

5 The referendum concurrent with the election on cannabis law reform could have helped to increase youth turnout, as youth tend to be the predominant consumers of the substance (Oldfield and Greaves 2021). This proposition is tested in Chapter 4 of this volume.

6 A standard vote volatility calculation uses the aggregated election results and summing all the vote share changes between the parties in the two elections in question, dividing them by two, giving an index that would be zero if all parties received the same vote shares as before and 100 if all the parties were replaced with completely different ones. For 2020/2017, this index is just over 24—somewhat higher than the previous New Zealand record of just over 21 at the 1935 election.

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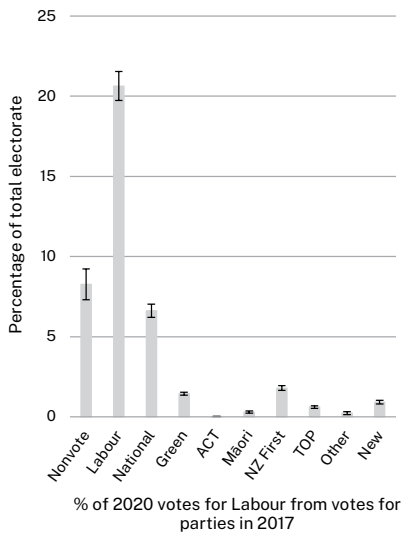


Figure 1.5 Where the 2020 Labour votes came from

Source: Appendix Table A1.3.

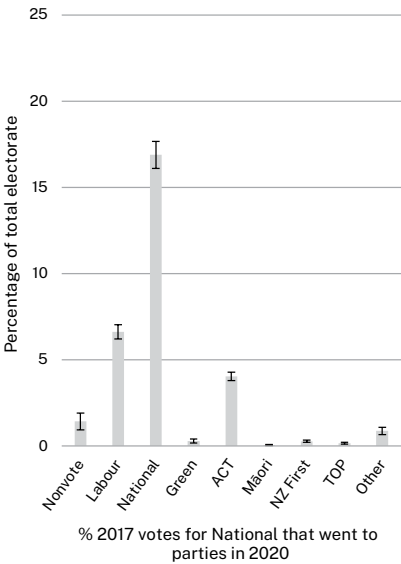


Figure 1.6 Where the 2017 National votes went

Source: Appendix Table A1.3.

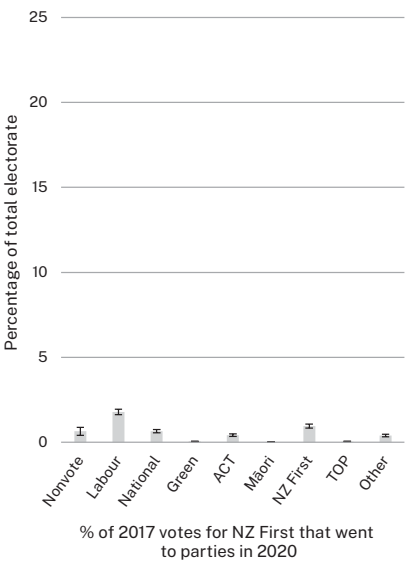


Figure 1.7 Where the 2017 New Zealand First votes went

Source: Appendix Table A1.3.

Drawing on data in the Appendix Table A1.3, Figure 1.5 displays Labour's inflows as percentages of the electorate including nonvoters. Labour won just more than 40 per cent of those enrolled to vote in 2020. Only half of that vote came from those who had voted Labour in 2017. About one-fifth came from previous nonvoters, a little less than one-fifth from previous National voters, a little less than 2 per cent from New Zealand First, and 1 per cent from new voters. Labour also picked up a few former Green voters but, among new voters entering the electorate, the Greens may have done slightly better than Labour.

Figure 1.6 examines National's outflows on the same baseline as percentages of the total electorate. National retained a little more than half its 2017 voters: 55 per cent. While National lost votes to ACT, it lost more to Labour: about 20 per cent of those who had voted National in 2017. Figure 1.7 shows New Zealand First's outflows. New Zealand First retained only one-fifth of its 2017 vote. Those leaving New Zealand First split on a ratio of about 1.7:1 for Labour compared with those who shifted to National or ACT.

A question in Vote Compass asked the left–right position of its participants. Its large sample means that estimates can also be generated for the average left–right positions of the people within each cell of Appendix Table A1.3. Those voting Labour at both elections had a mean of 3.2 ('most left' being zero, 'most right', 10). Those consistently National had a mean of 6.8, while 2017 National voters who moved to Labour in 2020 scored an average of 4.9—almost exactly corresponding to the median voter or centre-ground of politics. Overall, new voters scored an average of 4.2, putting them moderately to the left of centre. New Zealand First to Labour voters scored 4.1, New Zealand First to National voters 6.6, and those who remained with New Zealand First had an average of exactly five. All this is exactly what one would expect if the shifts had a reasonable correlation with self-placed ideology.

As a proportion of all those enrolled to vote in 2020, about 43 per cent voted for the same party as before (not much less than in 2017), which is a surprising finding given the increase in net change (see Appendix 1.1). The big increase in Labour's vote share was due in part to the increase in turnout. But there was more consistent directionality in vote switching than normal. There was less movement against the overall trend, thereby generating higher net effects. Under the surface, the 2020 election may have been less of an earthquake than it appears.

The shift to Labour produced significant gains in provincial electorates, many of which tend to be regarded as relatively safe seats for National because of their concentrations of farmers—normally strong National voters. Not long after the election, Federated Farmers of New Zealand Mid-Canterbury president David Clark speculated that ‘plenty of farmers have voted Labour so they can govern alone rather than having a Labour–Greens government’; in other words, they cast a ‘strategic’ rather than sincere vote (Murphy 2020). However, analysis of the NZES fails to confirm this (Van Veen et al. 2021). Most (57 per cent) of those in farming occupations voted for National and 21 per cent voted for Labour. These numbers contrast with those in 2017 when National received 67 per cent of the farming vote and Labour received just 8 per cent. But if National lost, ACT gained. Its share of the farming vote increased from 2 per cent to 16 per cent. Meanwhile, the New Zealand First farmer vote collapsed from 13 per cent to less than 1 per cent. It is tempting to assume that most farmers who had supported New Zealand First went to Labour, but our data can only suggest rather than confirm this.⁷ These observations are based on a very small subsample (N = 102 in the 2020 NZES) and should therefore be interpreted with great caution. But the combined centre-right National–ACT vote among farmers appears to have been relatively unchanged between the two elections, ruling out significant strategic behaviour by those formerly voting for those two parties. The key shift was one of farmers from National to ACT, giving National a warning that it would need to try to reconnect with its hitherto strongest supporters in the election aftermath.

The social foundations of the vote

All this suggests that the 2020 election, despite its drama, did not shatter the foundations of the New Zealand party system; it represented a big swing of the pendulum across the existing dial. Analysis of the correlates of voting choices in social structure and organisation supports this inference. By the 2017 election, the probability of people in households primarily dependent on a person with a manual or service occupation voting for Labour was only very slightly higher than for a person in a non-manual occupation—in other words, traditionally defined occupational-class voting was very low. Only

7 One can only speculate about the motives of farmers who voted New Zealand First in 2017 and shifted to Labour in 2020. While they might have wanted Labour to be able to govern alone, there were plenty of other reasons for them to change their behaviour.

farmers—separately identified in these categories—showed a strong class-voting effect (Vowles 2020a, 55–58). The same findings apply in 2020. While this very simple manual–non-manual approach to the measurement of class voting has been rejected in more recent theory, compared with data from previous elections, it does present a well-defined time series.

A huge international literature on class and class voting discusses alternative measurements of class that many claim continue to structure voting choices despite the decline of these manual–non-manual occupational effects (see, for example, Evans 2017; Connolly et al. 2016). Indeed, long ago, some of these were discussed and compared in the New Zealand context in analysis of the 1987 and 1990 elections (Vowles 1992). It is frequently claimed that these more sophisticated sociological analyses of class voting continue to demonstrate strong effects. Most of the schema rely on a larger number of occupational groupings and move beyond occupation to estimate the effects of employment status and workplace authority. One of the more popular recent models is that of Daniel Oesch (2006). But applying it to our NZES data from the 2020 election in an alternative analysis also confirms little or no effect.

Recent work also emphasises the importance of political party mobilisation of class interests, particularly on the left. It is argued that parties traditionally representing working-class interests no longer do so. Compounding the problem, Labour parties elect politicians most of whom are not from working-class backgrounds. If both tendencies apply, a lower level of class voting is to be expected. Meanwhile, class differences persist but are shaped by more factors than in the past. Indeed, we now live in a context of greater social and economic inequality than was the case a half-century ago when most of these class theories were being developed. Our understanding of class must expand beyond occupational groupings to include not only incomes, employment status, and workplace authority, but also the ownership of assets (Vowles et al. 2017, 66–68). Trade union membership is another important indicator of a potential residual working-class-based identity. In the 2020 election data, we have developed a further measure of workplace authority that relies on questions about employment status and supervisory authority.⁸

8 Theoretically, intersectional effects could be modelled by various interactions of the variables discussed here, and indeed others including gender and ethnicity. Practically, the small size of most of the subgroups means that few if any of these analytic options would generate findings that would be statistically significant.

Investigating all this, Appendix Table A1.3 displays the results of a multinomial logit model using demographics and social structure to identify the underpinnings of voting choices. In this multivariate model, the estimates for all variables take account of all the others, so they should be understood as ‘all else being equal’. In this table, voting for Labour is the reference category against which the values of the coefficients are estimated. The analysis includes nonvoting, vote choices for New Zealand First and the Māori Party, and a residual ‘other’ category. We mainly focus on the parties most supported, for whom there are enough respondents in the sample to give meaningful results.

Occupational status has no effect on vote choice for manual and non-manual workers, with the exception of farmers. Manual/non-manual or farmer occupational status has an effect on vote choice only for farmers. In terms of workplace authority, one can identify a continuum between having in the household an employer, someone who is self-employed, a person with supervisory responsibilities in their job, or a non-supervisory employee; these differences did matter with respect to both turnout and vote for National. Not voting is more likely among men, the young, non-union members, and employees who have no supervisory responsibilities. National and ACT voters are found less in urban than in rural areas. Higher incomes and wider ownership of assets are associated with National, as is non-membership of a trade union. The Green Party has a higher concentration of young voters than the other parties and appeals most in large cities. ACT does not appeal so much to women voters. Green voters are less likely to be church attendees and are much more likely to have a university degree than those voting for other parties. Māori were less likely than non-Māori to vote for National and ACT and Asian voters were less likely to vote for Green or ACT.⁹

9 While many other polls and surveys indicate Chinese voters are more likely to vote for the centre-right parties, they form only about half of the NZES Asian sample. Meanwhile, voters from other Asian backgrounds tended towards Labour. Response rates for ethnic minorities are relatively low in the NZES so their detailed breakdown must be treated with caution. Of 115 respondents declaring Chinese ethnicity, 22 per cent did not vote, 29 per cent voted Labour, and 32 per cent voted National. The next largest Asian group was 58 of Indian ethnicity; of those, 33 per cent did not vote, 45 per cent voted Labour, and only 11 per cent voted National.

1. A 'TEAM OF FIVE MILLION'?

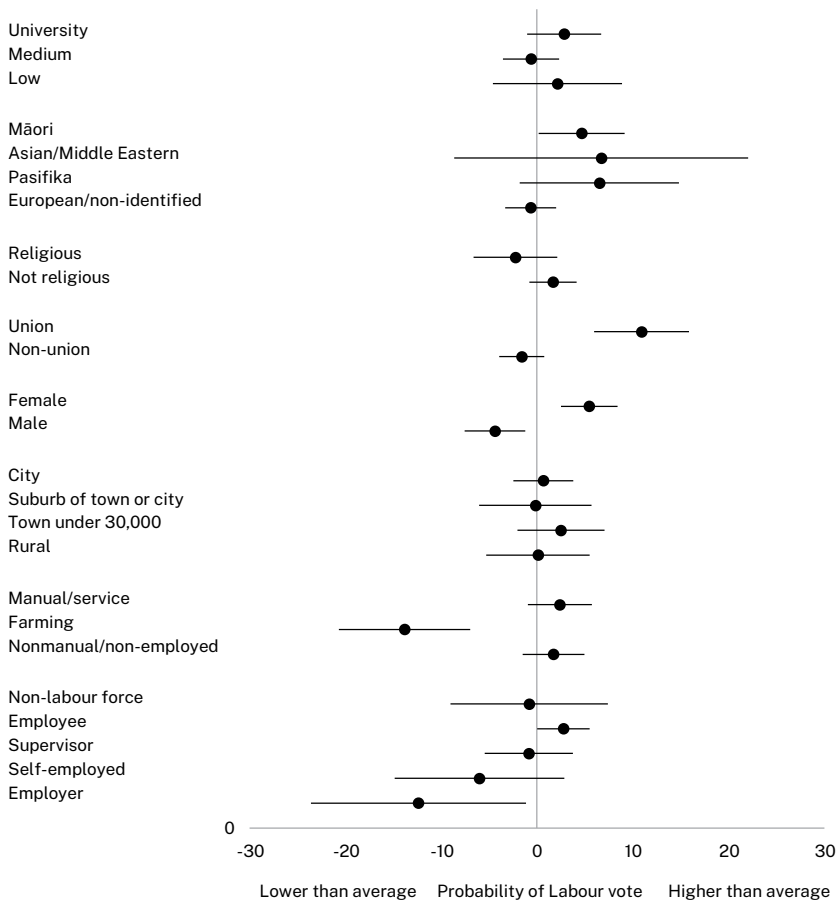


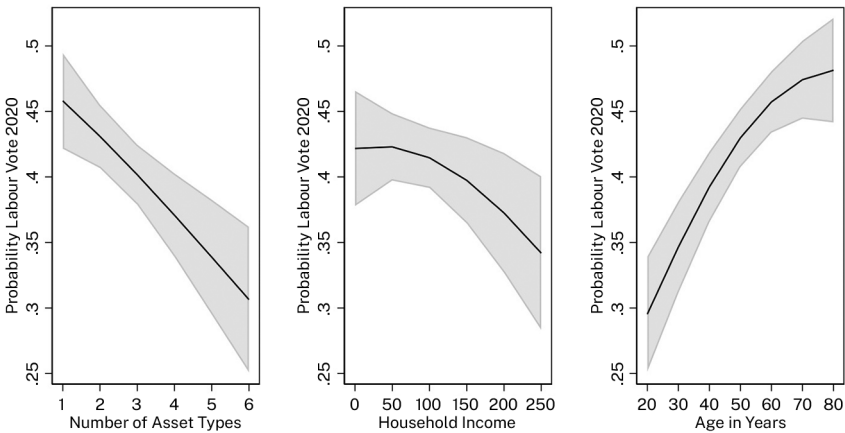
Figure 1.8 The percentage probabilities of voting Labour based on social structure and demographics

Source: Estimates from the model in Appendix Table A1.3.

Voting for Labour is, of course, the other side of the coin and, using estimates derived from the model, Figures 1.8 and 1.9a–c display these findings visually. As in the table, the probabilities are estimated across the whole electorate, including those who did not vote. On this basis, about 40 per cent voted Labour. The probabilities have been adjusted to represent their difference from the 40 per cent Labour vote across the whole sample. The confidence intervals give an estimate of certainty and uncertainty according to the size of the subsample. Most groups represented in the figures have confidence intervals that touch the yardstick at the zero mark, indicating their effect on voting choice was either insignificant or at best marginally significant. People in those groups were as likely as everyone

else to vote Labour. We highlight those who are further away. The most striking relationship is, again, that of employment status and workplace authority. Labour's status as the party of the worker is narrowly confirmed, but someone in the household of a non-supervisory employee or employees is only about 3 per cent more likely than average to vote Labour. Employers appear much less likely to vote Labour, but their number in the sample is small, making for wider confidence intervals. The same applies to farmers. Labour's votes were relatively evenly spread across the country.

Labour did much better among women than men and had strong support from people who had a union member in their household—a 10 per cent higher probability of a Labour vote than average. The nonreligious were a little more likely to vote Labour than the religious. All else being equal, Māori and Pasifika were more likely than average to vote Labour.



Figures 1.9a–c The probability of a Labour vote by asset types, household income, and age

Source: Estimates from the model in Appendix Table A1.3.

Figures 1.9a–c show some of the strongest correlates of the Labour vote: the number of different types of assets people own, household income, and age. The weaker propensity of the young than the old to vote Labour is largely because the young are more likely to not vote at all. According to our data, 39 per cent of those aged 18–31 voted Labour. National and the Green Party each took 13 per cent, and ACT 5 per cent, while 29 per cent of those on the roll in that age group did not vote. The assets in question are a house, a business, a second house for leisure or investment, stocks and shares, any savings, and membership of KiwiSaver or other retirement savings scheme.

A wide dispersion of assets has a very strong negative association with a Labour vote. The slope for income is not as steep, but it is in the same direction. Class, in terms of income and assets, still counts in New Zealand voting behaviour and party choice and the pattern is much as it was in 2017. Both elections partially but not entirely support claims that class voting in relatively high-income countries has shifted towards differences in income, asset ownership, and education (Gethin et al. 2021). In the case of education, it is significant for the Green vote, but not for Labour's.

The chapters to come

We conclude this chapter with an expanded discussion of our key research questions and a summary of what is to come. We explore the extent to which the Team of Five Million could represent the idea of a new, more united New Zealand or whether it is a discursive reframing of politics as 'business as usual'. New Zealand is a country of increasing cultural diversity, with a gap between rich and poor that has grown in recent decades. In that context, one might be dubious that a call to collective action would unite a public that many believe is increasingly divided.

These questions are unpacked from various directions. In Chapter 2, Jack Vowles starts with the most obvious initial inquiry: how important was the response to Covid-19 in securing Labour's victory? That importance is undeniable, but other, albeit related, factors were evident. Effective leadership and clear communication enhanced the soaring popularity of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. Her most significant achievement was to be perceived as trustworthy. A strong stimulus attenuated the economic effects. There was no ideological shift to the left. As discussed earlier, most of those who moved to Labour were centrists—those voters closest to the median left–right position—and it was approval of the Covid-19 response that pulled them to Labour in their voting choices, but that approval did not appear to shift their ideological or policy preferences across other dimensions.

In Chapter 3, Mona Krewel and Matthew Gibbons discuss the increased shift to campaigning on social media and its implications. Campaigning in the shadow of Covid-19 meant that parties and candidates placed a greater emphasis on social media as a possible fallback option should lockdowns resume. The defining debates revolving around the government's Covid-19 response were avidly taken up on social media. While Ardern was

answering the Team of Five Million's questions through positive messaging on Facebook Live, the National Party and its leader, Judith Collins, went negative on social media. Alongside this, Advance NZ and the New Zealand Public Party spread conspiracy theories and other disinformation about Covid-19 online, while the Māori Party turned out to be one of the most engaged campaigners on social media. Using text analysis data from the New Zealand Social Media Study (NZSMS), the chapter investigates how, and around what issues, the parties and candidates mobilised on social media. Specifically, it asks what roles were played by fake news, half-truths, negative campaigning, and populist communication strategies, especially around Covid-19. By linking this analysis to data from the 2020 NZES, it estimates how much voters used the internet during the campaign and the extent to which voters were aware of, and able to identify, disinformation on social media.

In Chapter 4, Jennifer Curtin, Celestyna Galicki, and Jack Vowles explore the implications of Covid-19 on electoral turnout and election administration. The original September election date had been set before the virus was recognised as a pandemic and the second outbreak in August posed a serious challenge. Because of the risks associated with in-person voting, and the limits that lockdowns and social distancing placed on campaigning, the election was postponed by one month. The decision was based on advice from the Electoral Commission, which had undertaken considerable research into alternative voting processes. The result saw increased turnout overall, and specifically among young people, stalling a longstanding downward trend. The chapter draws on several datasets, including the NZES, to examine voters' confidence in electoral administration, their take-up of extended advance voting options, and the extent to which voters engaged with two high-profile referendums. Indeed, the referendums—particularly that on cannabis legalisation—could have had significant effects on drawing people to the polls.

One might expect that Māori and other groups marginalised by continuing inequality, poverty, and discrimination, and most vulnerable to Covid-19, might feel less a part of the Team of Five Million. Historically, diseases introduced by early European contact, later colonial settlement, and increasing international travel had devastating consequences for Māori well into the early twentieth century—most notably, the influenza epidemic after World War I. Many Māori and Pasifika people live in large households, work in exposed occupations, find it more difficult than others to self-isolate, and are more vulnerable to hospitalisation and death if they contract

the virus (Steyn et al. 2021). Indeed, when community cases emerged, some *iwi* (tribal councils) and *hapū* (kinship group) in provincial New Zealand set up roadblocks to prevent unauthorised travel into their areas, usually in concert with the police.

As a result of such actions, together with the broader policy response and other factors such as a lower likelihood of international travel, cases among Māori initially remained lower than among the rest of the population. Nonetheless, the response from Māori was not uniform. Notably, the Covid-19 denial campaign of Advance NZ and the New Zealand Public Party was led by two Māori: Jami-Lee Ross and Billy Te Kahika, Jr. Both developments raise questions about the extent to which Māori felt they were part of Ardern's Team of Five Million.

With these issues in the background, Lara Greaves, Ella Morgan, and Janine Hayward in Chapter 5 discuss the Māori Party's return to parliament. Its exit in 2017 took many by surprise but it continued a trend of decline in its support over previous elections. The return of the party to parliament in 2020 was not so predictable. This chapter asks where votes and support for the Māori Party came from in 2020 and tests several explanations suggested since the election: an alleged shift to the left, the change of leadership, and the government's handling of Māori issues. The chapter also considers Māori voters within the context of the Team of Five Million.

In Chapter 6, Fiona Barker and Kate McMillan address attitudes and policy towards immigration, asking the question: 'Who belongs on the Team of Five Million?' The 2020 election campaign unfolded in a rare period of almost zero immigration, which dramatically altered and dampened explicit debate about the issue. Yet, the Covid-19 experience raised questions about the future shape and role of immigration in New Zealand's economy. Recent historically high levels of immigration have increased cultural diversity while also putting pressure on public services and infrastructure, particularly the housing market. Temporary immigrants have also helped to sustain a low-wage, service sector-heavy economy. In recent elections, anti-immigration sentiment has been notable for its limited support as a key issue. Against the backdrop of Covid-19, media coverage highlighted labour shortages and the separation of long-term migrants from their families, sparking regular public debate. The chapter finds evidence of some change but mainly continuity in voters' views of immigration.

In Chapter 7, Jennifer Curtin, Victoria Woodman, and Lara Greaves address the gender implications of the election. During the first six months of 2020, international media attention focussed on whether women political leaders—national and subnational—were more effective than their male counterparts at managing the Covid-19 crisis. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was front and centre in most of these analyses, given her government's decision to lockdown and her effective messaging and inclusive and reassuring style. What much of the international media missed, however, is that the Ardern-led government's economic recovery packages focussed largely on traditional (male) jobs, with little investment in social infrastructure, and marginal support for those on benefits. The chapter explores the extent to which New Zealand voters' views reflected the international awe of Ardern's leadership and whether women's opinions on key policy issues shed a light on whether they felt sufficiently included in the Team of Five Million—a sporting metaphor that might have appealed more to men than women. However, the result was that Ardern appealed to a record high of women voters, widening the gender gap for Labour to an extent not seen before. This was even though gender impact assessments of the pandemic seldom featured in the government's policy responses.

Echoes of scepticism about the scale and seriousness of the crisis, including attempts to portray the response as authoritarian and illiberal, were heard more broadly throughout 2020. With parliament and committees unable to meet in person, an Epidemic Response Committee was established, led by the Leader of the Opposition, to hear evidence on the government's decisions and their ramifications. A group of academics, self-titled Plan B, were vocal opponents of the government's 'hard and early' response, arguing that the economic costs would outweigh the public health benefits of border closures and lockdowns.

The appearance of unity was indeed challenged in the leadup to the 2020 election by the realities and future implications of New Zealand's elimination approach. As a country with 27 per cent of the population not born within its borders, about one million living overseas, and an economy heavily dependent on tourism, migrant labour, and international education, New Zealand's conception as a Team of Five Million presented significant challenges to sectors of the economy. Such observations point to the precarious nature of the extent to which Ardern's Team of Five Million could be considered inclusive.

Taking up some of these themes, Luke Oldfield and Josh Van Veen in Chapter 8 examine the critics and outsiders of the 2020 election campaign. Outside the usually dominant National Party, some 300,000 New Zealanders voted for right-of-centre parties that had expressed scepticism about the government and its Covid-19 response. These parties cut across both the mainstream of New Zealand politics (for example, the libertarian ACT) and the fringe (for example, the traditionalist New Conservatives and conspiracist Advance NZ). While only ACT gained parliamentary representation, the three parties collectively received more than 10 per cent of the party vote. This chapter explores the characteristics of those 300,000 voters who chose not to join the Team of Five Million.

In Chapter 9, Sam Crawley addresses the challenge to governments and their electorates that will not go away, even if temporarily eclipsed by the Covid-19 crisis: climate change. Before the pandemic, a consensus among elites on climate change had been growing in New Zealand. The chapter examines what happened to the issue during the election campaign, given the high-profile focus on both the pandemic and its economic ramifications. It shows that few people saw climate change as an important election issue, despite most people wanting stronger government action on it. Moreover, even if there was a Team of Five Million for New Zealand's Covid-19 response, there does not seem to be one for climate change. There are clear partisan divides among the public when it comes to the issue, with supporters of right-wing parties tending to have lower levels of support for government action than supporters of left-wing parties.

Chapter 10, by Jack Vowles, Jennifer Curtin, and Lara Greaves, concludes by summarising the key findings and exploring their implications. The metaphor of the Team of Five Million has obvious limitations given New Zealand's relatively high levels of social inequality, differences in wealth and power, and in different people's immediate exposure and vulnerability to the crisis across a diverse society. Yet, it seems to have served a rhetorical purpose, encouraging remarkably high levels of compliance in the first year or more of the crisis. With the intrusion of the greatly more infectious Delta variant in 2021, the challenge posed has become more severe, offset by the introduction of vaccination, but with an increasing number of infections, and cracks emerging in the community response. We update the narrative of events into the middle of 2023.

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Appendix 1.1

Table A1.1 Issue salience

Issue	%
Covid-19	26
None named	16
Economy	15
Housing	7
Environment	5
Government	4
Health	4
Cannabis	3
Party bias	3
Welfare, inequality, poverty	6
Tax	2
Immigration	1
Education	1
Euthanasia	1
Other (below 1%)	5

Appendix Table A1.2 provides an estimate of the total vote flows between the two elections, including flows in and out of nonvoting. It is derived from a weighted cross-tabulation of data from the Vote Compass post-election sample of just over 26,000 people. There are similar NZES data but, subject to some limitations, the much larger size of the post-election Vote Compass sample makes it a better source.¹⁰ The table's cells show total percentages of the entire Vote Compass sample. The 2020 votes are read down by column, and the 2017 votes across by row. This vote flow matrix draws on the post-election dataset from Vote Compass and a study of turnout using a 'bigger' sample from the electoral rolls (Vowles and Gibbons 2023). The table is weighted by a process of 'raking' from the results of the election, drawing on the vote shares reported in the official results and data from the electoral rolls to further calibrate the proportions of previously ineligible voters and those who did not vote at both elections. This includes those who joined the roll in 2020, many of whom were eligible to be enrolled in 2017.

¹⁰ The NZES has similar data based on a panel: people who participated in both the 2020 and the 2017 NZESs. Replicating the same weighting process on the NZES panel subsample produces almost the same cell percentages across the diagonal of consistent behaviour in 2017 and 2020.

	Nonvote	National	Green	NZ First	ACT	Māori	Others
Employee	-1.088** (0.518)	-0.808** (0.326)	-0.072 (0.640)	-0.143 (1.041)	0.135 (0.505)	-1.886** (0.928)	-0.104 (0.710)
Not employed	-0.546 (0.587)	-0.652* (0.391)	0.256 (0.716)	-1.017 (1.109)	-0.408 (0.654)	-1.909** (0.945)	-0.672 (0.825)
[Nonmanual/not employed]							
Farmer	0.494 (0.428)	1.014*** (0.211)	0.445 (0.394)	0.261 (0.829)	0.768** (0.305)	1.305* (0.679)	0.713 (0.544)
Manual/service	-0.104 (0.207)	-0.080 (0.133)	-0.044 (0.173)	0.254 (0.290)	0.027 (0.186)	0.584 (0.373)	0.113 (0.285)
[Rural]							
Town	0.698* (0.389)	-0.414** (0.184)	-0.334 (0.329)	-0.115 (0.539)	-0.761*** (0.242)	-0.565 (0.517)	0.090 (0.408)
Suburb	0.746* (0.433)	-0.277 (0.223)	0.695** (0.327)	0.390 (0.574)	-1.524*** (0.340)	-0.320 (0.582)	0.078 (0.415)
City	0.504 (0.376)	-0.349** (0.171)	0.745*** (0.275)	0.318 (0.539)	-0.949*** (0.232)	0.493 (0.450)	0.164 (0.337)
Age	-0.038*** (0.006)	0.009** (0.004)	-0.041*** (0.005)	0.024** (0.012)	-0.002 (0.005)	0.003 (0.010)	-0.022*** (0.006)
Income	-0.005** (0.002)	0.006*** (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.002)	0.006*** (0.001)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)
Assets	0.072 (0.078)	0.253*** (0.050)	0.160*** (0.060)	-0.074 (0.124)	0.114* (0.068)	0.114 (0.125)	-0.103 (0.122)
Female [male]	-0.469** (0.205)	-0.078 (0.122)	-0.572*** (0.157)	-0.741** (0.306)	-0.723*** (0.173)	-0.353 (0.297)	-1.019*** (0.247)

	Nonvote	National	Green	NZ First	ACT	Māori	Others
Union [non-union]	-0.669** (0.271)	-0.794*** (0.180)	0.114 (0.171)	-0.348 (0.363)	-0.970*** (0.269)	-0.568 (0.362)	0.022 (0.294)
Religious [not]	0.131 (0.265)	0.261* (0.145)	-0.511** (0.232)	0.055 (0.299)	-0.234 (0.233)	0.476 (0.330)	0.895*** (0.240)
[European/other]							
Asian	-0.004 (0.355)	-0.201 (0.234)	-0.856*** (0.283)	-13.931*** (0.326)	-1.040** (0.475)	-12.619*** (0.705)	-0.262 (0.418)
Pasifika	0.700 (0.479)	-1.195** (0.584)	-2.053* (1.050)	0.531 (0.998)	-0.652 (0.751)	-12.448*** (0.655)	-3.250*** (0.808)
Māori	-0.014 (0.225)	-1.155*** (0.163)	-0.358* (0.184)	1.074*** (0.313)	-0.951*** (0.260)	3.650*** (0.689)	0.136 (0.315)
[No qualification]							
School/certificate	-0.159 (0.300)	0.217 (0.187)	0.658* (0.396)	0.125 (0.384)	0.312 (0.269)	0.203 (0.456)	0.220 (0.481)
University	-0.570 (0.360)	-0.305 (0.217)	1.466*** (0.405)	0.202 (0.502)	-0.303 (0.314)	0.879 (0.588)	0.854* (0.501)
Constant	2.028** (0.802)	-1.201** (0.482)	-1.317 (0.881)	-4.301*** (1.576)	-1.427** (0.694)	-5.053*** (1.285)	-0.998 (1.098)
Observations	3,286	3,286	3,286	3,286	3,286	3,286	3,286
r ² _p	0.127						
Ll	-4,602						

*** p < 0.01
** p < 0.05
* p < 0.1

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses; multinomial logit model; Labour vote is the reference category; explanatory variable reference categories in square brackets.

Sociodemographic variables (Table A1.3, Figure 1.8)

For employment and occupation, participants' position is estimated to represent the nature of the household and its relation to the labour market. To avoid either gender bias (by using male head of household) or individualist bias (disregarding the other person in the household), we assign the participant to a category according to that person or their partner having the most theoretically significant characteristics first.

Employment status

Estimated from responses of respondent and their partner if data for the latter are available. 1) A participant in a household with an employer is classified as such; 2) any household with someone self-employed but not an employer is classified as such; 3) any participant in a household with someone who is a supervisor but not an employer or self-employed or a supervisor is classified as such; leaving 4) a participant in a household containing only non-supervisory employees as the residual category for those with employment status data. Those with no data on employment status form an additional category (5).

Occupation

Any household with a person reporting involvement in farming by industry or occupation is classified as a farmer. Any household with a person in a manual or service occupation (but not a farmer) is classified as such. The rest form a residual non-manual or not-employed category.

Ethnicity

A participant reporting Māori ethnicity is classified as Māori; a participant reporting Pasifika but not Māori ethnicity is Pasifika; a participant reporting Asian or Middle East origin but not Māori or Pasifika is Asian; the rest are a residual category who are mostly European/Pākehā.

Education

Low education is those without any qualifications. The middle category is anyone with a level 1–7 qualification without a university degree.

Income

Income is scored by the midpoints of the ranges measured by six income categories.

Assets

Constructed as the number of asset types: a house, a business, a second house for leisure or investment, stocks and shares, any savings, and membership of KiwiSaver or any retirement savings scheme. By simple addition, this is made into a scale from zero to six.

Union household

Any household that contains a union member, or not.

Religious

Attends religious services more than once a year, or not.

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