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Shock, Bounce, and Reward?

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This chapter analyses how New Zealand's experience of Covid-19 affected electoral change at the 2020 general election. It also provides a schematic comparative overview of the electoral consequences of the pandemic in several other countries. The local focus is on the shift of votes to Labour. The chapter considers four arguments and tests them as much as is possible from the available literature and evidence:

1. Voters can evaluate the success or failure of crisis management and governments will stand or fall based on their judgement.
2. A government cannot simply rely on a 'rally round the flag' impetus; its competence in managing the crisis matters more.
3. Political trust was a primary factor in generating political support for measures to contain the pandemic and the ability of the Labour government to reap an electoral reward.
4. Successful government response to a major crisis may trigger not only short-term but also longer-term political support.

As explained in Chapter 1, the 2020 election rewarded the New Zealand Labour Party with a landslide victory. It generated the biggest net transfer of votes from one election to the next in New Zealand's electoral history and the highest turnout in 20 years. Labour gained a comfortable single-party parliamentary majority unusual in a country with a proportional electoral system. There is wide agreement that the government's Covid-19 response was effective (Jefferies et al. 2020). An elimination strategy kept New Zealand free of the pandemic for long periods when its global severity and

contagion were at their peak. The result of the election gave the government a mandate to continue its elimination policy until it was no longer required. A strong stimulus attenuated the economic effects. The success of the government's strategy illustrated the advantages of social cohesion and a sense of responsibility for others.

The next section explains the idea of an unexpected exogenous shock beyond the normal conditions underpinning electoral politics and the party system, the literature underpinning the concept, and its implications for this analysis. Next, attention moves to the broader context of the crisis, examining post-Covid elections around the world. When aligned with case-to-population ratios, the results of 19 post-Covid elections in high-income democracies test whether a country's pandemic response effectiveness enhanced the chances of incumbent government survival. Returning to New Zealand, a summary of the government response leading up to the election is followed by analysis of opinion and behavioural changes between 2017 and 2020, and then of the election itself.

The politics of an exogenous shock and the international context

The Covid-19 pandemic generated an exogenous shock: an event precipitated outside the boundaries of the system that it affects—in this case, the patterns of 'normal' electoral politics in New Zealand. Such shock events can dramatically affect political behaviour. The number of political parties, the votes cast for them, their foundations in society, and the extent and nature of their ideological differences may all be affected.

The theoretical framework of the social psychological Michigan model still defines much current scholarly inquiry of electoral behaviour. Early Michigan theorists argued that party systems in long-established representative democracies tend to mature. Electoral choices should become less volatile and more stable, underpinned by increasing levels of party identification (Converse 1969; Shively 1972). Early political research on Western Europe confirmed a similar consistency in the development of party systems. It emphasised the persistence and apparent consolidation of political cleavage structures, most of them 'frozen' at the point of the achievement of universal male suffrage (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Bartolini and Mair 1990).

The Michigan model of political behaviour also accommodated the possibility of an exogenous shock that could disrupt behaviour and trigger a 'critical election' (Key 1955). A shock followed by a critical election could potentially lead to a realignment of parties and partisan choices that would, in time, consolidate and restabilise the system (Inglehart and Hochstein 1972). The Great Depression of the 1930s provided the first example. The experience and aftermath of World War II further consolidated party systems. New Zealand provides one of the best examples of a realignment generated by the Depression. The three-party system of the 1920s was transformed into a two-party system at the 1935 and 1938 elections (Leithner 1997, 1119).

But just as the Michigan model was being applied to explain apparent party system stability, in the early 1970s, a sharp increase in the price of oil induced a new economic shock. The tendency towards consolidation began to reverse. Party systems began to de-align, not realign. Electoral volatility tended to increase, and levels of partisan identification to decline, although with much intercountry variation (Särilvik and Crewe 1983; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Franklin et al. 2009). New Zealand party politics exhibited many of these developments. Closer to the present, compared with most other high-income representative democracies in the early twenty-first century, New Zealand politics has been both stable and only moderately polarised. Volatility surged after the first election under proportional representation in 1996. By the 2008 election, the two major parties of the centre-right and centre-left, National and Labour, respectively, had recovered dominance (Vowles 2014).

Meanwhile, from the early 1990s, the economies of high-income democracies entered a period of stability described as 'the great moderation' (Bernanke 2012), only marginally disrupted by regional crises in Latin America and Asia. Research in electoral politics had turned to the estimation of the effects of short-term change rather than long-term stability and thus more modest variation in the business cycle (Kramer 1971; Fair 1978; Fiorina 1981). Here, the focus was not on shocks but on the policy performance of incumbent governments. It was assumed that those governments could be assigned most, if not all, responsibility for economic outcomes. Through a sense of general wellbeing, volatility in economic growth and levels of employment could affect the re-election or defeat of incumbent

governments. Where growth and employment were strong, voters tended to reward governments. In recessions and with increasing unemployment, voters tended to punish them.¹

Doubts about the competence of ordinary voters to have coherent and stable political attitudes had been confirmed by survey research in the 1950s and 1960s (Converse 2005). With that scepticism in mind, the theory of retrospective democratic accountability for economic performance could take on considerable normative weight. If voters were not sufficiently informed to vote ‘correctly’ on issues of the day, at least they might be capable of holding the government to account for their country’s economic performance. However, this argument is vulnerable to the observation that, even in the largest and most closed economies, patterns of growth and recession are affected by factors outside one country’s borders. Voter incompetence could be even worse than a simple lack of ‘real’ attitudes. Blind voters are prone to blame governments for outcomes beyond their control. Myopic voters are focussed on short-term rather than long-term performances (Achen and Bartels 2016). This would deny one of the key arguments outlined above: that voters can deliver a meaningful electoral response on the record of a government that has faced a crisis.

An alternative interpretation addresses this challenge: rather than retrospective reward and punishment, there is a process of selection. Collectively, voters are capable of discounting exogenous factors and can extract a ‘competency signal’ from performance. They apply it to their assessment of a government party into the future (Duch and Stevenson 2008). The test becomes how governments meet an economic challenge or crisis, and their success or failure in so doing. Applying this approach to natural disasters confirms that governments can be rewarded for an effective response, potentially over more than one subsequent election (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011; Bechtel and Mannino 2022).

The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008–09 was the biggest shock to hit the global economy since the Great Depression. Identification of short-term effects first followed the logic of retrospective economic voting theory. Initial findings suggested that the great recession that followed the GFC adversely affected the electoral prospects of incumbent governments regardless of

1 Gardener (2016) tests the extent of economic voting in New Zealand using NZES data from 1990 to 2014.

their ideological complexion. Election timing also mattered (Bartels 2014). In many cases, voters appeared to be punishing governments for a crisis they did not create, thus casting doubt on selection theory.

More recent research challenges these findings. The depth of the crisis alone did not predict the success or failure of incumbents (Hernández and Kriesi 2016; Talving 2018). If sufficient people are indirectly informed by cues from elite and media sources, they are collectively capable of taking account of both institutional constraints on government and the state of the global economy. They can identify the effects of their own government's performance (Kayser and Peress 2012). The selection model directs the focus not so much to the crisis itself, but to what governments do to meet the challenge. The effects of the economy on voter choice were much stronger after the crisis than either during or before it. The odds of incumbent government survival post-GFC were significantly increased if there was an economic stimulus underpinning a robust recovery. These differences were conditional on the balance between austerity and stimulus in policy responses—parties of the centre-right usually doing best under austerity conditions and those on the centre-left making gains under stimulus (Hellwig et al. 2020, 147–55, 169–79).

As the challenges of the GFC faded into the background, the Covid-19 crisis emerged. The economic effects of Covid-19 have been much more severe than those of the GFC: an estimated 3.3 per cent decline in global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020 compared with only 0.1 per cent in 2009 during the GFC (IMF 2021). The extent of the GFC and the ability to recover from it were not entirely the responsibility of governments. Some had less of a crisis to manage and more tools and resources available to respond, making the extraction of a competency signal more difficult. Traditional left–right policy differences could also be mobilised. There were competing diagnoses of the causes of the GFC lying in market or government failure.

The pandemic's impact has been felt much more widely, led initially by high-income countries, but rapidly extending everywhere. Its effects were not just economic; they have also been life-threatening, particularly among the elderly, with the potential to unleash 'a primal, deep-seated fear of death' (Baekgaard et al. 2020, 6). The timing of the Covid-19 intrusion varied. There were minor advantages to countries where exposure was delayed and where those countries were better prepared, but because of its high rates of infection, the virus was bound to spread. At first glance, unprepared

health systems provided some grounds for punishment of governments, but systems of public health are embedded institutions in which change is slow and difficult (Forest and Denis 2012; Braithwaite et al. 2016). It would therefore be less credible to blame incumbent governments for circumstances equally the responsibility of previous governments. Incumbents' immediate policy responses were the centre of attention and thus shaped perceptions of competence.

With all this in mind, the argument foreshadowed comes to the fore: that an electorate can effectively judge government performance in a crisis. Following the simple logic of reward and punishment, governments that failed to control Covid-19 would be expected to lose votes given basic expectations about a state's duty to protect its citizens. However, one analysis claims that most US voters in 2020 lacked sufficient knowledge about the positions of presidential candidates in dealing with the pandemic to vote effectively on the matter (Guntermann and Lenz 2022). Presenting evidence that challenges this scepticism, county-level analysis of the 2000 US presidential election estimates that the rate of Covid-19 cases negatively affected the vote for Donald Trump and could have helped mobilise voters to turn out to vote for Joe Biden (Baccini et al. 2021).

Another way of denying a competence effect is the idea of a 'rally round the flag'. People support the government out of a sense of national loyalty and social cohesion. In other words, the underlying causes of voter choices are emotional and not based on even minimal evaluation or judgement. Similarly, a simple search for security could lead voters to opt for status-quo candidates (Bisbee and Honig 2021).

Emotions clearly played a role in the New Zealand public's response, but collective public opinion is a complex mixture of reason and emotion. A public 'mood' is based on a combination of the two. The first lockdown experience in New Zealand was successful because it drew on the idea of collective effort, in tune with the appeals of the government (Sibley et al. 2020). The comparative research hitherto finds little evidence that the crisis alone boosted government support. A public mood of approval requires perceptions that a government has acted effectively (Bol et al. 2021). A failure to be seen to act effectively, perhaps compounded by opposition criticism, might see no effect at all. Even an effective policy response might generate only a short-term boost in approval (Kritzing et al. 2021). Considerable

variation in trust and democratic satisfaction has been uncovered in Europe, linked to the immediate aftermath of lockdowns and variation in responses (Bol et al. 2021).

Meanwhile, another line of inquiry has taken a different direction, identifying in government responses to the pandemic a danger of authoritarian governments triggering an authoritarian response in public opinion. For example, research in the United States and Poland has suggested that fear of Covid-19 promoted social conservatism and a greater propensity to vote for the right (Karwowski et al. 2020). But, despite some questioning of the legal basis of some government actions, there is little support for these concerns in the New Zealand context (Vowles 2022).

Comparative data can be brought to bear to test the claim that assessment of performance mattered. Several other countries held elections during the period in question. There was considerable variation in governments' responses, particularly when the threat from the virus first emerged. Before infection and death rates were fully understood, governments and their advisors in many countries with health services with high capacity to deal with respiratory disease hoped that modest restrictions to discourage transmission would be sufficient to manage Covid-19 (Shokoohi et al. 2020, 437). Stronger restrictions would inevitably constrain economic activity. Many feared an economic recession. As it turned out, the experience of the uncontained virus had dire economic effects anyway, much stronger than the effects of restrictions (Hasell 2020). Countries seeking to maintain economic activity with lower levels of restriction were often forced into more severe measures, seesawing back and forth between levels, causing uncertainty and disruption. Where elimination has been feasible it has been the best response for both health and the economy (Oliu-Barton et al. 2021). Only with high levels of vaccination and less fatal variants have lower-level restrictions become effective, albeit at the continuing cost of infections and deaths.

Research on the effects of Covid-19 on electoral behaviour requires selection of cases during the relevant period of crisis. A significant number of studies have already appeared although systematic analysis remains limited (see the summary in Yu et al. 2022). Only eight national elections were held in high-income democracies during 2020; 12 followed in 2021 and into early 2022. The best estimate of the effectiveness of a government's Covid-19 response is the ratio of cases to population. As an estimate of actual cases, differences across countries will contain some errors (Greer et al. 2021, 6–7). For our

purposes, one can observe that these are data about which voters in the countries concerned would have been directly or indirectly aware. In the world of electoral politics, perceptions matter more than precise estimates.²

Some simple statistical analysis shows a relationship between the survival or defeat of incumbent governments associated with the log of the number of Covid-19 cases per million reported at the time of the election. The log of cases is used because, above a certain level, their effects tend to flatten out. The main incumbent is the party of the prime minister or president. It is necessary to control for the number of months since the advent of Covid as the effects diminish over time. As shown in Figure 2.1, simply dichotomising re-election versus defeat produces a relationship between the number of cases and outcomes.³ The partisanship of governments, added in another unreported model, has little or no effect. The diminishing effects of the case ratio serve as a warning to post-Covid comparative electoral analysts. The longer the delay between the onset of the pandemic and the election, the harder it could be to identify the effects.

Among the elections featured, two stand out: South Korea and New Zealand. In both, there were low case numbers because of effective government action at a time when many other countries were struggling to contain the pandemic. Landslide victories followed for incumbent centre-left government parties. In South Korea in April 2020, the allied Democratic and Platform parties won the largest parliamentary majority since the restoration of democracy in 1987. The voting turnout was 66 per cent—the highest in 28 years. The government had been under attack for scandals and poor economic growth, but those concerns were overshadowed by the effective pandemic response. Pride in the success of the country's containment drive greatly enhanced the popularity of president Moon Jae-in (Kim 2020). Like other East Asian countries, South Korea was better prepared in its health response because of its recent experience with early pandemic threats, giving its government some advantages. Trust in government was a powerful mediating factor in shaping the public response (Yu et al. 2022). As discussed below, the Korean experience has many parallels with that of New Zealand.

2 For this reason, reporting of the number of cases rather than deaths is more appropriate. While the latter are arguably the best data available in 'objective' terms, reports of these data were delayed and less likely to be considered by mainstream media.

3 The analysis incorporates a jack-knife test that corrects the confidence intervals for the possible effects of influential cases. The logged case ratio variable has negative values because some of its values were fractions of one. It is possible more sophisticated statistical modelling could dig more deeply into these data, but the small number of cases and large number of other potential variables would almost certainly confound the analysis.

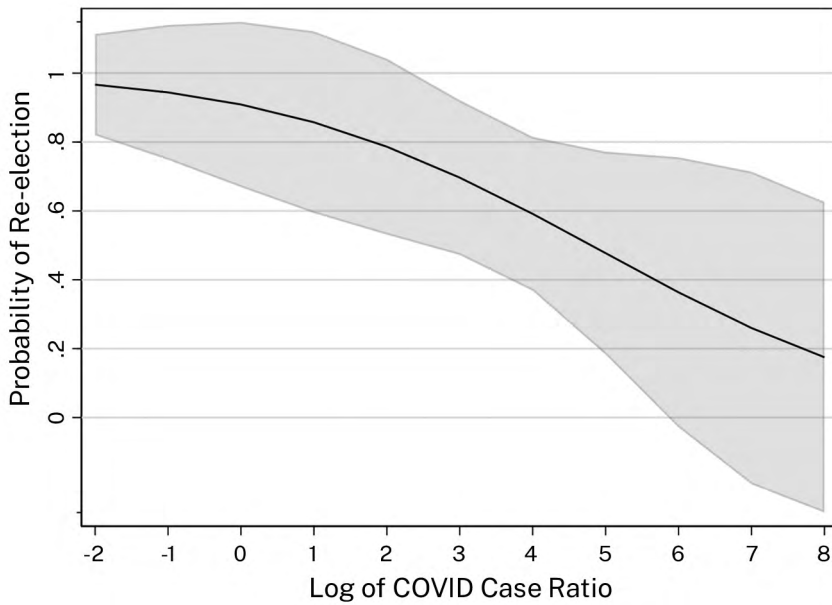


Figure 2.1 The relationship between Covid-19 cases and the survival or defeat of incumbent governments, 2020–2022

Source: Appendix Table A2.1.

Table 2.1 General elections held since Covid-19 (high-income countries only)

Country	Date	Main incumbent	Cases (per million)	Vote change
Israel	2 March 2020	Re-elected	0.10	4.4
Ireland	30–31 March 2020	Defeated	51.64	–4.7
South Korea	15 April 2020	Re-elected	0.58	12.9
Singapore	10 July 2020	Re-elected	27.71	–8.6
Lithuania	11 October 2020	Defeated	48.96	–4.4
New Zealand	16 October 2020	Re-elected	0.39	13.1
United States	6 November 2020	Defeated	331.89	0.8
Israel	23 March 2021	Defeated	107.42	–5.3
Netherlands	17 March 2021	Re-elected	350.88	0.6
Norway	13 September 2021	Defeated	217.15	–4.7
Canada	20 September 2021	Re-elected	114.17	–0.5
Iceland	25 September 2021	Re-elected	88.32	–1.0
Germany	26 September 2021	Defeated	92.39	–8.8
Czechia	8–9 October 2021	Defeated	77.79	–2.5

Country	Date	Main incumbent	Cases (per million)	Vote change
Japan	31 October 2021	Re-elected	2.09	1.4
Chile	21 November 2021	Re-elected	123.92	0.3
Portugal	30 January 2022	Re-elected	5,480.27	5.1
South Korea	9 March 2022	Defeated	5,191.07	3.5
Hungary	3 April 2022	Re-elected	142.6	4.9

Notes: Cases per million and official election results by country. See Appendix 2.1 for the regression model.

Source: Global Change Data Lab (2022).

The New Zealand experience of Covid-19

Less emphasised in the international literature is the quality of leadership. Assessment of the New Zealand case, backed up by other research, highlights the effectiveness of the authorities in ensuring strong communication to elicit community support (Grieve 2020; McGuire et al. 2020; Beattie and Priestly 2021a, 2021b). Labour framed the battle as one to be fought by citizens together with their government, to protect the health of all citizens but particularly the most vulnerable, in line with the social democratic principles of the party.⁴ As a high-profile woman leader, Jacinda Ardern may also have had an advantage in being able to project herself as honest, trustworthy, and competent at dealing with health issues (Piazza and Diaz 2020). Chapter 7 of this volume expands on this theme.

In sharp contrast to the South Korean example, the reasons for New Zealand's strong response can be found not in preparedness but in its absence. There was a pandemic response plan in place, but it was geared to a new strain of influenza. Because of its high infection rate, Covid-19 posed a much more serious threat (Kvalsvig and Baker 2021). After years of constrained health expenditure under New Zealand governments of both the centre-right and the centre-left, the number of intensive care unit beds

⁴ Announcing the first Covid-19 response package in the House of Representatives, Finance Minister Grant Robertson explicitly framed his government's response as being in line with the Labour principles behind the creation of New Zealand's welfare state in the 1930s, saying: '[I]n New Zealand, we have been here before, with major economic and social crises. In my lifetime, we have seen Governments respond with austerity—an ideology that has done enormous damage to the fabric of our society. We have also seen other examples, such as the first Labour Government, who responded with investment, pragmatism, optimism, and kindness. It is from them that I take my lesson on how we recover and rebuild in a just, fair, and far-sighted manner' (Robertson 2020).

was the second lowest across 22 countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). New Zealand's ratio of hospital beds to population was sixth lowest in the OECD, but slightly higher than in Sweden, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and Canada (World Bank 2022).⁵

New Zealand's first case of Covid-19 was reported on 28 February 2020. On 11 March, the World Health Organization declared an official pandemic. Beginning on 14 March, all those entering New Zealand were required to self-isolate. Public events were cancelled and public places began to close. Community transmission was anticipated. On 19 March, the border was closed to almost all but returning New Zealand citizens and residents. It remained closed on that basis until early 2022.⁶ On 25 March, on the advice of medical and epidemiological experts, the entire country moved into a comprehensive 'Level 4' lockdown—one of the most stringent enacted anywhere. The objective of the lockdown was 'elimination'—defined as

reduction of the incidence of a disease to zero in a defined geographical area. While absence of disease is the ultimate goal, elimination criteria ... allow for occasional outbreaks or imported cases, provided they are stamped out within a defined time period. (Baker et al. 2020: 198; Cameron 2020)⁷

Travel and tourism together constituted 15 per cent of New Zealand GDP in 2019. Tourism generated about 8 per cent of employment (OECD 2021a, 2021b). The border closure also revealed the dependence of the tourist industry on the employment of low-budget backpackers and other temporary migrant workers. Agriculture and horticulture suffered from a lack of seasonal labour, much of it also supplied by migrant workers from offshore.

On 28 April, the lockdown was eased to Level 3, and cases began to peter out. On 14 May, restrictions were eased to Level 2 and, on 9 June, to Level 1, restoring much of everyday life to how it was before the pandemic. Days began to pass with no new cases other than at the border. All those entering the country were in managed isolation in hotels in the three major cities for

5 New Zealand was somewhat better placed in its availability of doctors and nursing staff, sitting at close to the OECD mean, with slightly more nurses than average but somewhat fewer doctors (OECD 2020, 7–13). The ratio of beds to population dropped by more than half between 2002 and 2009. Most of that period was under a Labour-led government.

6 With limited exceptions for those deemed to be making an economic contribution, such as people with highly valuable skills, entertainers, and actors for television and film production.

7 Description of the conditions specified for the various alert levels and a timeline of the Covid-19 response measures can be found in New Zealand Government (2021b).

a 14-day quarantine period. One hundred and two days followed without community transmission. On 11 August, four community cases emerged in Auckland—their source never identified—with others following. Auckland went into Level 3 lockdown, the rest of the country into Level 2. Capacity testing and contact tracing had been very poor at the outset; by then they had been improved (Roche et al. 2020). Almost all cases were detected and moved into isolation. The coming general election, scheduled for 19 September, was postponed until 17 October.

On 21 September, all areas outside Auckland moved to Level 1, with Auckland itself following on 7 October. Cases once again petered out except at the border. Consequently, the 2020 general election could be held without the need for social distancing. However, provisions for advance voting had been extended. Many more people than at previous elections cast early votes, reducing congestion at voting places (see Chapter 4, this volume).

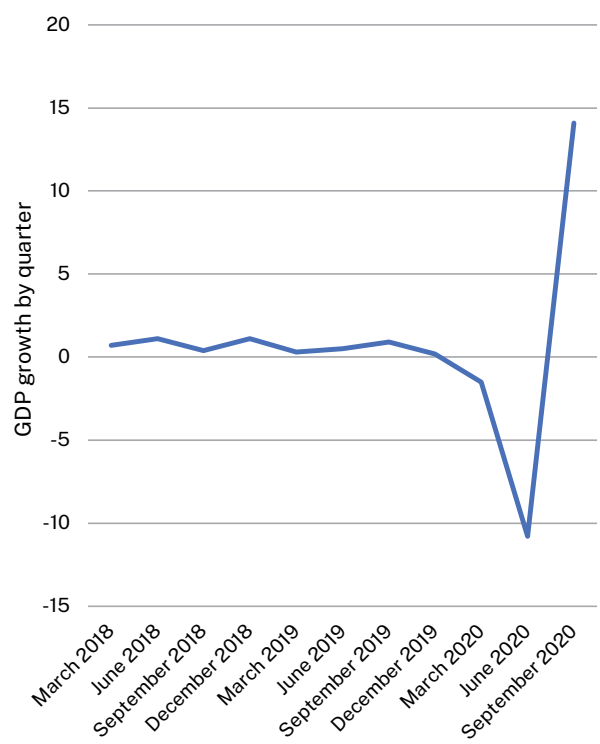


Figure 2.2 Quarterly GDP growth

Source: StatsNZ (2021).

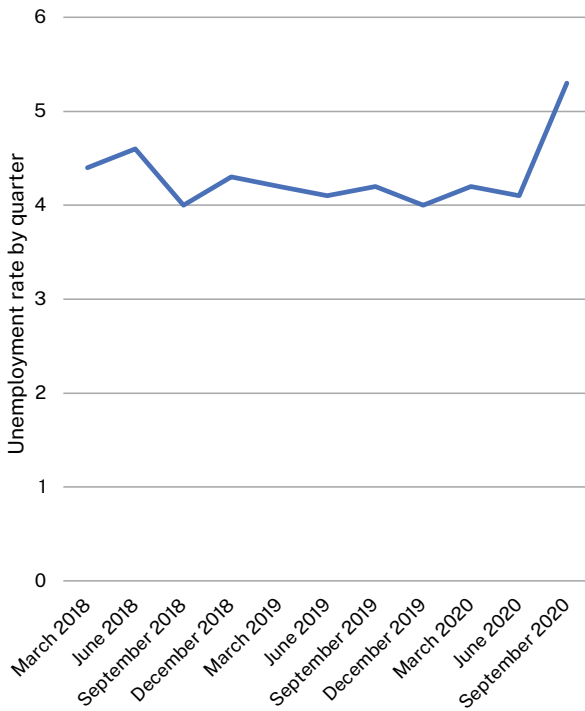


Figure 2.3 Unemployment rate

Source: StatsNZ (2021).

Even before the first lockdown, the economy had been weakening. On 17 March 2020, the government announced a stimulus package of NZ\$12.5 billion—equivalent to 4 per cent of New Zealand’s GDP. It increased health expenditure and boosted benefits for those on low incomes. About three-quarters of the package supported business and employment with a wage subsidy to businesses. In the budget delivered on 14 May, a further NZ\$50 billion package was announced. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has estimated that New Zealand’s stimulus in 2020 was equivalent to 19.3 per cent of that year’s GDP—in global comparison, second only to that of the United States (IMF Fiscal Affairs Department 2021). New Zealand’s net core government debt grew from 19 per cent of GDP in 2019 to 27 per cent at the end of 2020—expected to peak at 48 per cent in 2023, which is still relatively low by comparative standards (New Zealand Government 2021b). Much of this debt was funded internally by bond purchases through the New Zealand Reserve Bank’s program of quantitative easing.

As Figure 2.2 shows, the economy contracted by just less than 11 per cent in the year to the June quarter of 2020. As shown in Figure 2.3, the wage subsidy held off the effects on unemployment. Stimulus pushed the economy to bounce back by 14 per cent in the September quarter, despite the Auckland lockdown at the end of that period. Unemployment increased, but only marginally above 5 per cent. By the election on 17 October, community transmission had been stopped and the economy was on a relatively stable footing.

Explaining the shift to Labour in 2020

With the background to the election established, the next step is to test the arguments under examination with the evidence from the 2017 and 2020 NZESs. The possibility of long-term effects is considered first. The extent of the landslide and the increase in turnout could have been the early stages of a realignment. A renewed sense of social solidarity could shift political priorities towards the left, as did the experience of World War II in many countries, driving a ‘huge demand for social protection that needed to be addressed by policymakers’ (Obinger et al. 2018, 426).

The 2020 New Zealand general election sparked both an electoral landslide and a sharp increase in turnout, particularly among the young. The latter is potentially important, as realignments can take place in at least two ways: conversion, whereby voters shift from previous loyalties to new ones, or the mobilisation of new voters either hitherto not regularly voting or becoming eligible to vote for the first time. For example, a realignment of parties in the United States that consolidated in the 1940s was primarily by way of generational recruitment. The shift to the Democratic Party during the 1930s was a short-lived conversion effect (Norpoth et al. 2013).

The 2020 general election in New Zealand therefore had the potential to become a realigning or critical election. Early evidence suggested a shift to the left in public opinion, yet caution is in order. Strong as it was, the impact of Covid-19 is unlikely to have such far-reaching effects on political values as the experiences of those coming to maturity in the 1930s and 1940s during and after an economic depression that was followed by a global war.

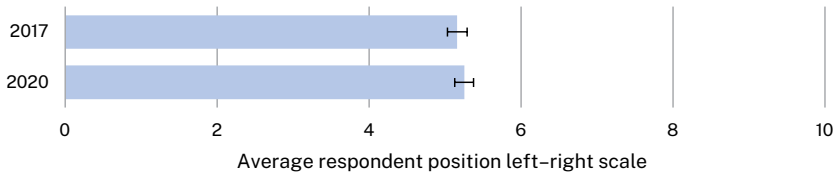


Figure 2.4 Average right-left scale positions, 2017 and 2020

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

The 1,259 people who responded to the 2020 NZES represent 62 per cent of those who participated in the 2017 NZES.⁸ Descriptive statistics from this panel data indicate that there was no ideological shift to the left. If anything, as Figure 2.4 shows, average self-placement on the right-left scale shifted marginally further to the right of the centre although well within confidence intervals. Because they tend to converge around the midpoint and tend to have a larger number of missing values than other instruments, left-right scales can be criticised as imprecise instruments, but they are widely used and defended in the literature (Kroh 2007).

A more substantive estimate should correlate with the left to right positions: opinions about inequality. Increasing social and economic inequality has been a theme of recent social commentary. NZES analysis of the 2014 election indicated strong majority support for government action to reduce inequality, but this was not followed with sufficient votes to elect a centre-left government (Vowles et al. 2017). Only in 2017 did the centre-left come to power—although through a coalition rather than winning a vote plurality (Vowles and Curtin 2020). Post-pandemic, inequality has worsened. Monetary stimulus boosted the property market and pumped asset values (see, for example, Hickey 2021). As a partial offset, welfare benefits were increased. While progress towards the government’s target of reduced child poverty has been called into question, as of mid-2021, the key estimates of deprivation had trended somewhat downwards since 2018 (StatsNZ 2022). Figure 2.5, however, shows that, while the belief that the government should act to reduce income differences still had strong majority support, it fell back in 2020.

⁸ Comparison of the full data from both the 2017 and the 2020 NZESs finds the same changes—or the same absence of changes—as those reported below, although the gaps are slightly smaller.

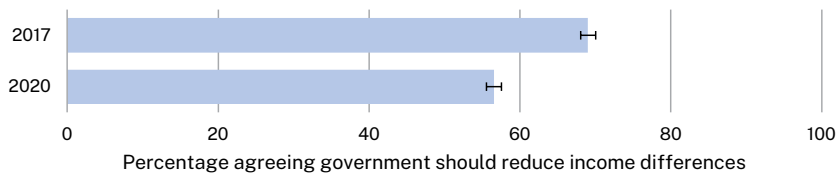


Figure 2.5 Opinion on government action to reduce inequality

Note: The question was agreement or disagreement across a five-point scale with the statement: ‘The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels.’

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

Preferences for government expenditure show little evidence of big attitudinal shifts in the four most salient policy areas. Figure 2.6 shows that preferences for higher health and housing expenditure have good majority support but dropped marginally from 2017 to 2020, while minority preferences for higher expenditure on welfare and unemployment benefits marginally increased. Longitudinal analysis of the NZES shows strong majority support for health expenditure that benefits almost everyone and declining minority support for benefits that are targeted at those in need (Humpage 2014). Meanwhile, New Zealand faces a crisis of housing underprovision and inflated values (Mitchell 2021). These inter-election expenditure preference shifts are hard to explain. The data clearly refute any concerted shift to the left. Marginal increases in favour of greater support for the unemployed and those on other benefits hint at some movement in favour of greater support for those worst affected.

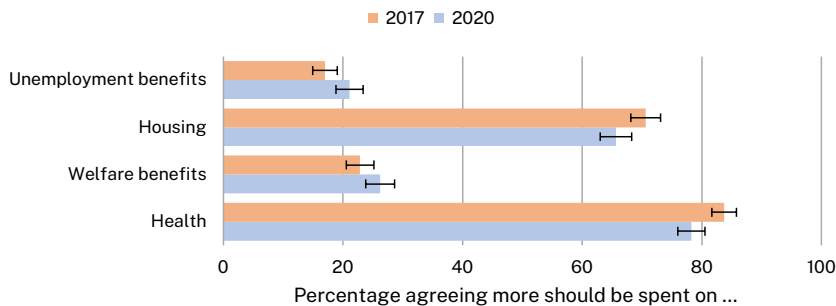


Figure 2.6 Government expenditure preferences, 2017 and 2020

Note: The question was: ‘Should there be more or less public expenditure in ... Remember if you say “more” or “much more” it could require a tax increase, and if you say “less” or “much less” it could require a reduction in those services.’

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

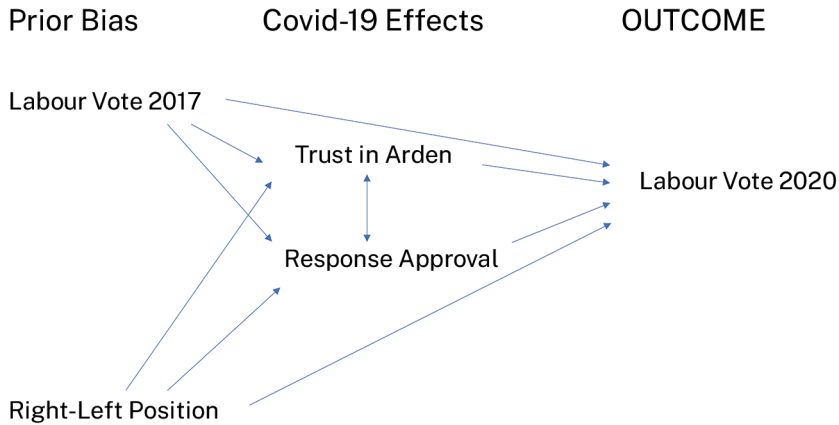


Figure 2.7 A model of the shift to Labour in 2020

To move on to the direct examination of the 2020 shift to Labour, the model displayed in Figure 2.7 is informed by a combination of theory and exploratory analysis. It is based on change. Most people who voted in 2020 had voted at previous elections and brought to their 2020 behaviour their habits and memories of previous behaviour. As a result, most had ‘prior bias’. We know from a wealth of research in cognitive psychology that people resist new information that is inconsistent with their existing assumptions and past behaviour (see Kahneman 2012).⁹

The change model is given effect by using an individual’s 2017 vote and right–left ideological position as baseline variables. While the panel data show there was some shifting in ideological positions from 2017 to 2020 ($r = 0.62$), Figure 2.4 shows there was virtually no net movement. This change approach facilitates reduction of the variables to a relatively small number that accounts for the shifts. Our data also include the crucial question: approval or disapproval of the Covid-19 response.¹⁰ The model posits both trust in Prime Minister Arden and response approval as variables mediating between previous behaviour and right–left ideological position on the road to a Labour vote. We assume both direct and indirect influences of the prior variables and reciprocal effects between trust in Arden and

⁹ An alternative estimate of prior bias would be partisan identification, but in New Zealand this is relatively fluid and the previous vote is a better estimate. In 2020, those replying to the question on party identification saying they were ‘generally speaking, close to Labour’ increased from 19 to 28 per cent in the inter-election panel.

¹⁰ ‘Do you approve or disapprove of the way the government has responded to the coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak?’ A five-point scale.

response approval. Indeed, given the endogeneity inevitably built into most relationships between variables in public opinion and political behaviour, except for prior Labour vote, causality could go in both directions.¹¹ One can reasonably assume that the main direction was towards vote choice.

Figure 2.8 estimates the direct effects for each variable net of those of the others by displaying the differences in the probability of one's 2020 vote between the maximum and minimum values of the explanatory variables. As expected, a previous Labour vote has a big influence; a Labour voter in 2017 was about 30 per cent more likely to vote Labour in 2020 than someone who did not vote Labour in 2017 (a probability difference of about 0.3, as shown in the figure). Comparing the highest and lowest degrees of trust in Ardern (a probability difference of about 0.5) and response approval (about 0.3), one can see that these perceptions strongly shifted votes to Labour. Those on the right were more likely to resist the pull to Labour, but approval of the Covid-19 response nonetheless pulled many in the centre and centre-right to Labour, as Figure 2.9 shows.

Figure 2.9 shows how right–left positions condition the effect of response approval on the change to Labour. Left is estimated at point two on the 10-point scale. Leftists were almost entirely unaffected by their approval or disapproval of the pandemic response, although the majority approved. Those on the right, at eight on the scale, became almost as likely as people on the left to vote Labour if they strongly approved of the pandemic response. Perhaps the most telling slope is that for the median voter: the more the government response met approval, the higher was the probability of a shift to Labour. Appendix 2.1 provides further detail, including an expanded model with more control variables that tells the same story.¹²

The last addition to the picture is a model showing what factors lay behind approval or disapproval of the Covid-19 response. Approval was very high at 83 per cent. Figure 2.10 displays the differences and confidence intervals between the maximum and minimum probability values of the variables of theoretical and/or substantive significance.

11 Realistically, one should also accept a small degree of endogeneity even here because of recall error.

12 Many of the normal sociodemographic factors associated with a Labour vote do not register as significant, simply because they are absorbed by the prior bias of a 2017 Labour vote.

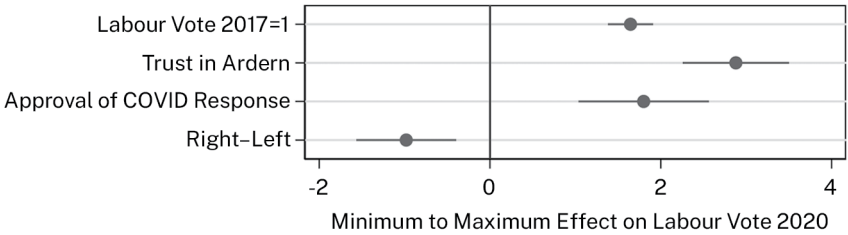


Figure 2.8 Labour vote in 2020: Effects of trust in Jacinda Ardern, approval of Covid-19 response, and previous vote

Source: Model II presented in Appendix Table A2.2.

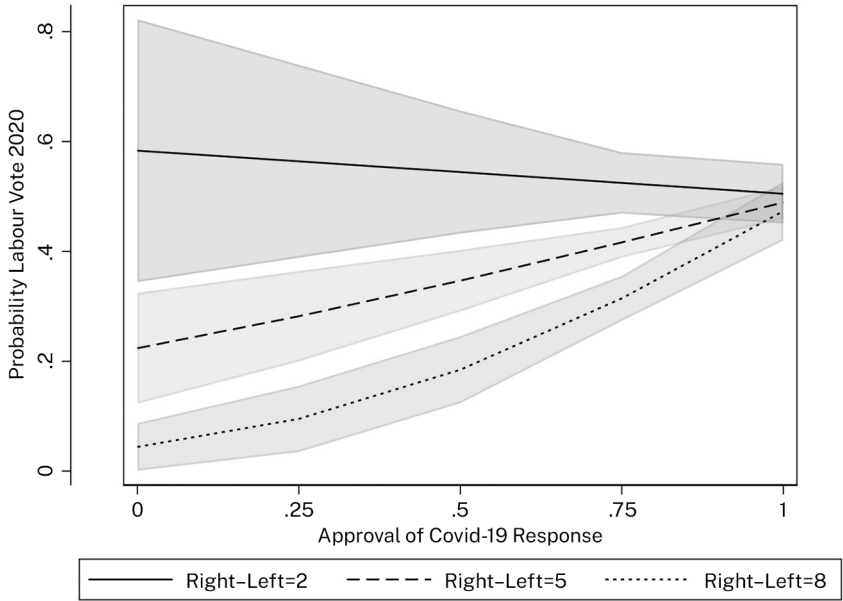


Figure 2.9 How left-right position conditioned the effect of response approval on the shift to Labour

Source: Model III presented in Appendix Table A2.4.

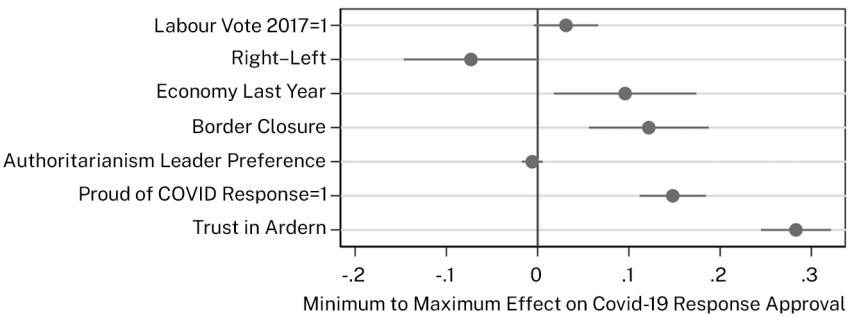


Figure 2.10 Approval of the Covid-19 response

Source: Appendix Table A2.3.

Following the same logic as the voting model, one expects the background factors that measure prior bias towards Labour and towards the left to have underlying effects that dispose people to approve of the response. They do, but the variance explained is relatively low at 7 per cent (see Appendix Table A2.4).¹³ Once the factors more proximate to approval or disapproval of the Covid-19 response are controlled, whether people voted Labour or not in 2017 had a very weak relationship with that sentiment.

The variance explained by the final model is a healthy 34 per cent. In terms of ideology, those on the right remained more resistant to approval, even though, as the earlier analysis has shown, many did approve and made the move to Labour. A positive appreciation of the state of the economy over the previous year—much boosted by the government’s stimulus by the time of the election—had significant effects, as did approval of the border closure.¹⁴ Preferences for strong leadership were weakly associated with disapproval of the government response, not approval, but had no significant effect—indicated by the confidence interval touching the ‘zero’ or no-effect line.¹⁵ The feeling of pride in the country’s response also had a high correlation with approval of the Covid-19 response: 38 per cent of

13 A model without these baseline controls can be found in Chapter 8 of this volume, giving a different picture of the sociodemographic and other ideological elements behind approval or disapproval.

14 ‘When should New Zealand open its borders to tourists, students, and temporary workers from countries where there is community transmission of Covid-19? Immediately, only when community outbreaks can be safely contained, only after they go through 14 days’ quarantine and two negative tests, only when there is a vaccine available?’ Operationalised as a four-point scale, with ‘Don’t know’ set to missing.

15 An alternative childhood socialisation values index was used in another model; its effects were insignificant.

the sample expressed that emotion.¹⁶ Overall, the biggest effect was, again, that of trust in Ardern. This picture presents an image of an electorate making a sound collective judgement based on two of the most important elements of the policy response. Emotion certainly played a role, but it was a supplementary one underpinned by knowledge and experience.

Discussion and conclusions

This chapter presents evidence that governments can benefit electorally from successful crisis management after a strong unexpected ‘shock’, and that success can be both deserved and understood by the electorate. Despite scepticism (Achen and Bartels 2016; Guntermann and Lenz 2022), voters are collectively capable of assessing government performance and assigning credit or blame in conditions of crisis. Moreover, this was more than a simple ‘rally round the flag’. Success and competence mattered. That said, more is needed than simple competence. The perception of competence must be supported by good leadership and clear communication and underpinned by trust. The New Zealand case clearly bears out these claims. International evidence suggests that electorates responded similarly, but the further the election was from the emergence of the crisis, the smaller was the effect.

There is little preliminary evidence to confirm or even suggest that a successful government response to the crisis triggered not only short-term but also longer-term political support. Other than the size of the shift, and the increase in turnout, one finds little evidence of a critical and realigning election. As Chapter 1 reports, turnout did increase, particularly among the young, but there is no evidence Labour benefited more than other parties from the youth vote. The turnout increase could have more to do with something else, as Chapter 4 will suggest. Nor does one find evidence of an ideological shift that would provide the foundations for significant changes in public policy settings on social and economic issues.

Despite the increase in welfare benefits and a slight reduction in child poverty, the social and economic outcomes of the government response were not redistributive and have exacerbated wealth inequality. While understandable in a post-Covid world facing an intensifying climate crisis,

16 ‘Which, if any, of the following describe your feelings about the government’s response to Covid-19: angry, happy, disgusted, hopeful, uneasy, confident, afraid, proud, none of these?’ A variable of zero or one on ‘proud’.

the government's post-pandemic fiscal caution will mean only marginal changes in a redistributive direction are likely in the short to medium terms. The final chapter in this book discusses Labour's retreat from its ambitious policy agenda as the 2023 election was approaching.

Differences between those who situate themselves on the political right and the political left continued to underpin voting choice between Labour and its opponents on the right and centre-right. But the correlation between left-right position and voting choice weakened in 2020. Significant numbers situating themselves in the centre or on the right moved to Labour because they approved of the government's policy response. The explanation of this movement lies in selection theory, based on expectations of future competence and underpinned by enhanced trust in leadership and the successful elimination strategy. When Jacinda Ardern stepped down as prime minister in January 2023, New Zealand remained one of the very few countries in the world with no estimated excess deaths as the result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Appendix 2.1

Covid-19 and global elections

Table A2.1 reports the statistical details of the model used to construct Figure 2.1.

Table A2.1 Covid-19 and the re-election or defeat of main incumbent parties, high-income democracies, 2020–2022

Outcome: Defeat or re-election of main incumbent	
Log of Covid-19 cases per million at election	–0.561*
	(0.443)
Time by month since January 2020	0.115
	(0.091)
Constant	0.807
	(1.163)
R ²	0.185
Log-likelihood	–10.5407
Obs	19

*** p < 0.01

** p < 0.05

* p < 0.1

Note: OLS coefficients, jack-knife standard errors in parentheses.

Table A2.2 Labour vote change models

Labour vote in 2020	I	II	III	IV	V
Voted Labour in 2017	1.976*** (0.119)	1.646*** (0.135)	1.627*** (0.135)	1.557*** (0.139)	1.567*** (0.143)
Right-left	-1.842*** (0.264)	-0.980*** (0.299)	-6.915*** (1.615)	-0.106*** (0.034)	-0.096*** (0.034)
Approve of Covid-19 response		1.800*** (0.390)	6.711*** (1.832)		1.298*** (0.413)
Right-left* response approval			-1.798* (1.066)		
Trust in Ardern		2.879*** (0.318)	2.876*** (0.323)	2.499*** (0.376)	2.181*** (0.365)
Age				0.006* (0.003)	0.005* (0.003)
Female				0.228* (0.120)	0.207* (0.121)
Māori				0.054 (0.147)	0.069 (0.149)
Economy				-0.037 (0.079)	-0.068 (0.080)
Income				-0.126 (0.251)	-0.154 (0.253)
Assets				-0.050 (0.048)	-0.046 (0.049)
Satisfaction				0.417 (0.274)	0.235 (0.273)
Strong leader				-0.037 (0.054)	-0.047 (0.054)
Reduce inequality				0.029 (0.064)	0.002 (0.065)
Ardern's competence				2.147*** (0.387)	1.883*** (0.401)
Constant	0.054 (0.155)	-4.105*** (0.462)	-0.887 (1.002)	-4.538*** (0.560)	-4.896*** (0.611)
Observations	3,730	3,613	3,613	3,434	3,406
r ² _p	0.173	0.2663	0.272	0.278	0.281
ll	-2,096	-1,799	-1,786	-1,675	-1,652

*** p < 0.01

** p < 0.05

* p < 0.1

Note: Logit coefficients, robust standard errors in parentheses.

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

Table A2.3 Approval or disapproval of the Covid-19 response

Covid response approval	I	II
Voted Labour in 2017	1.022*** (0.209)	0.352* (0.208)
Right-left	-2.244*** (0.316)	-0.803* (0.415)
Economy good		1.054** (0.451)
Border closure		1.340*** (0.362)
Strong leadership		-0.065 (0.064)
Proud of response		2.083*** (0.441)
Ardern trustworthy		3.113*** (0.245)
Constant	2.705*** (0.215)	-1.330*** (0.448)
Observations	3,730	3,650
r ² _p	0.0655	0.323
ll	-1,526	-1,084

*** p < 0.01

** p < 0.05

* p < 0.1

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

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

Table A2.2 contains the first three models discussed in the chapter text: baseline (I), augmented (II), and interactive (III). The final two models test for the possible confounding effects of other variables. However, the pseudo r-squared statistic reporting the fit of the various models hardly improves between model III and models IV and V, indicating that model III captures most of the story. Most of the other variables do not register as statistically significant. It is worth noting the tendency of older people and women to be more likely to shift to Labour, even given these other controls.

Running alternative versions of these models and possible interactions between variables of interest (too many to report) indicates that some expectations were not borne out. There is no evidence that the movement to Labour represented a generational shift; age barely registered as a covariate in most models. Economic voting based on household circumstances did not stand out significantly when tested across various social groups. So far, other than the elderly and women there is no evidence that demographic or social categories of voters were affected in their voting choices by different levels of exposure or vulnerability to the crisis.

One can also note that while competence features in perceptions that led people to Labour, and remained highly significant in the final model, the stronger perception was trust, giving both empirical and theoretical reasons for its emphasis. The two perceptions were highly correlated.

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