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Mobilising Voters from the ‘Team of Five Million’: Electoral administration and turnout in the 2020 election

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Introduction

Two features of the 2020 election in New Zealand stand out above all others: the landslide victory of the Labour Party and a significant increase in electoral turnout, particularly among the young. This chapter analyses the latter. From the international literature and theories of turnout, one would not have expected a turnout increase as the result of an election held in 2020, given the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most research began from the inference that the fear of catching Covid-19 would discourage people from going out to vote (Picchio and Santolini 2021; Santana et al. 2020). Where risk is high, turnout should be down; where risk is lower, turnout should be less affected.

The case of New Zealand is distinctive because, by the time of the election, there were no Covid-19 cases in the community. That said, life in New Zealand had not returned to pre-pandemic ‘normal’. Mask-wearing was still expected and Covid-19 vaccinations were not available in the country until four months after the 2020 election. Moreover, the election was postponed briefly because some cases emerged just before the date on which parliament was to be dissolved. These were contained within a few weeks,

but some restrictions remained in place, and no one could be sure that new cases would not emerge during the campaign. Yet, the final vote count revealed that the 2020 election had the highest official turnout since 1999, at 82.2 per cent, and the highest voter enrolment since 2008.

After reviewing changes in turnout over time, this chapter proceeds by exploring three possible reasons for its increase and why fears about a potential decline proved to be ill-founded in the New Zealand case. The first relates to electoral integrity and trust in the democratic system. Internationally, commentators expressed fears that the effect of such restrictions could be to reduce trust and create fears of an authoritarian government. Election postponements along with the emergency powers required to implement lockdowns could erode democracy and turnout and exacerbate declining trust in public institutions (James and Alihodzic 2020; Landman and Splendore 2020). In preparation for such a possibility, the New Zealand Electoral Commission made significant efforts to protect the integrity of the election and to encourage turnout. Drawing on qualitative data and secondary survey analysis from the Electoral Commission, we assess whether a high level of electoral integrity and trust in New Zealand's democratic process contributed to increased turnout.

Second, we examine whether voters saw this election as mattering more than normal given the context of Covid-19. In other words, did the pandemic have a mobilising effect, reinforcing the feeling that elections are important, thus leading to increased engagement between voters and political parties, their messages, and their candidates (Franklin 2004; see also Santana et al. 2020; Constantino et al. 2021)? And, we ask to what extent was political engagement hampered by Covid-19 and the restricted ability of parties to campaign at in-person events in 2020, compared with the 2017 election? Drawing on earlier arguments in Chapter 2, we also explore whether trust in the democratic process was important to increased turnout.

In the final section of this chapter, we examine a third potential explanation. Research in the United States reports that high-profile referendums held concurrently with legislative elections can have the effect of increasing turnout for the latter (for example, Childers and Binder 2016; Smith and Tolbert 2004). The 2020 election was held concurrently with two referendums: one on euthanasia or the end of life, and the other on legalisation of cannabis. Some have argued that the strong increase in youth turnout in 2020 was encouraged by the cannabis referendum, which was only narrowly lost. Drawing on NZES data, we test whether the increased turnout was indeed a referendum effect and therefore perhaps had little to do with Covid-19.

The context of New Zealand's high voter turnout

On 28 January 2020, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that the next New Zealand general election would be held on Saturday, 19 September. This announcement came just two days before the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Six weeks later, on 11 March, when Covid-19 was relabelled a pandemic, New Zealand had five confirmed cases of the virus (New Zealand Doctor 2022). Case numbers began to increase substantially, leading the government to close the border, introduce a four-tier alert system, and implement a two-month nationwide lockdown (see Chapter 2 for further details). What became known as the 'elimination' approach was initially successful. Community case numbers ebbed.

By the time Ardern launched her party's re-election campaign on 7 August 2020, New Zealand had experienced 99 days without community transmission. However, Covid-19 returned on 13 August, eight days before parliament was due to be dissolved. The government put Auckland into a Level 3 lockdown, restricting travel and social gatherings, initially for three days. Political parties had to postpone or cancel campaign events. The prime minister initially advised the governor-general to delay for several days both the dissolution of parliament and the issue of the electoral writ (Knight 2021). Less than a week later, after consultations with political parties and electoral officials, the prime minister announced that the election would be delayed until 17 October 2020. This represented the first electoral postponement since World War II and the first for a public health emergency. But New Zealand was not alone in its decision to postpone its general election. In 2020, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA 2021) calculated that at least 70 countries and territories globally had experienced a delay in their elections.

As Chapter 1 has shown, turnout in New Zealand elections hit a low point in 2011 and has since been in recovery: incremental increases in turnout across the past three elections, with the greatest upsurge evident among younger voters, whose rates have always been significantly lower than turnout overall. They remain lower than among the elderly, but the gap has narrowed. Table 4.1 provides additional detail by age bands from 2014.

Estimating how Covid-19 and the associated changes to the election date, campaigning, and voting methods influenced turnout is beyond the reach of our NZES data, but we can provide a qualitative context.

Before the pandemic, there was limited theoretical literature on the effects of such a crisis (Scheller 2021). Cross-national analysis of participation in both national and local elections held between January and July 2020 suggested that turnout decline was most common. While in some cases falls in turnout were a result of electoral integrity concerns, in established democracies, public abstention was attributed to the health risks associated with Covid-19 (Garnett et al. 2022). Several other studies found that higher levels of deaths and infections in a polity were correlated with lower voter turnout, especially among older voters (Santana et al. 2020; Constantino et al. 2021; Picchio and Santolini 2021).

Table 4.1 Voter turnout by age, 2014–2020 (per cent)

Age band	Turnout as percentage of eligible population				Turnout as percentage of those enrolled			
	2014	2017	2020	Change	2014	2017	2020	Change
18–24	48.0	50.1	60.9	10.8	62.7	69.3	78.0	8.7
25–29	50.8	54.1	62.6	8.5	62.1	67.6	74.4	6.8
30–34	59.3	63.8	67.9	4.1	67.4	70.9	74.5	3.6
35–39	70.4	72.2	73.0	0.8	72.8	74.3	76.0	1.7
40–44	74.7	75.4	77.1	1.7	76.2	77.8	78.7	0.9
45–49	77.0	78.3	79.4	1.1	78.6	80.0	81.5	1.5
50–54	79.3	80.3	83.1	2.8	80.8	81.9	83.2	1.3
55–59	82.1	83.7	85.1	1.4	83.3	84.1	85.2	1.1
60–64	84.8	85.1	87.4	2.3	86.0	86.2	87.3	1.1
65–69	86.9	86.9	88.5	1.6	88.1	88.2	89.1	0.9
70+	81.7	84.8	85.3	0.5	85.8	86.3	86.8	0.5

Source: Electoral Commission (n.d.).

However, given few countries undertook an elimination approach, one would not expect such concerns to apply. In addition to alternative procedures put in place by the Electoral Commission detailed in the next section, there was no community transmission of Covid-19 in the three weeks leading up to the election. The risks associated with voting were thus comparatively low.

That said, the continued presence of alert levels, the closed border, managed isolation for arrivals, and social distancing, in addition to economic uncertainty, meant a sense of crisis remained. The literature on crises and voter turnout is useful here; building on Downs's (1957) rational choice framework, it proposes that external shocks could have a mobilising effect because they reinforce the feeling that elections are important and could provide an opportunity for more engagement between voters and politicians (Santana et al. 2020; Constantino et al. 2021). Assuming voters conduct a cost-benefit analysis of turning out to vote, the argument would follow that, if costs related to time, access, and knowledge are reduced, the benefits of a vote making a difference could increase (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Or, to put it another way, the costs of not voting may be perceived as too high (Niemi 1976).

Maintaining electoral integrity during a time of crisis

Easing the pathway to casting a vote was already a priority in the minds of New Zealand's election administrators. New Zealand rates high on most indicators of the quality of democracy. As observed by one authoritative source, the country has 'a rich history of free and fair elections and the electoral process is characterised by a very high level of integrity' (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022). New Zealand has an independent Electoral Commission. Over the past decade, it has pursued an apparently successful voter participation strategy, removing as many barriers as possible to the act of casting a ballot. This includes allowing electoral registration up to and including election day and extensive provision of advance voting facilities that were already in place before the pandemic. New Zealand's election administrators were able to face the challenge with a considerable stock of resources and experience and a relatively high level of public trust in politicians (Vowles 2022, 5).

There has been considerable discussion and dissection of electoral integrity in recent decades and the ways in which it should be defined and measured (Garnett et al. 2022; James 2020; Norris 2014). For the most part, such research has focussed on elections that have occurred, rather than those that have not. This is despite natural disasters and humanitarian crises causing election delays in the past (Hyde and Marinov 2012; James and Alihodzic 2020). The advent of Covid-19 has reignited scholarly interest in

the impacts of natural disasters and humanitarian crises on the democratic process. Holding elections at a time when human life is at risk may necessitate a time-limited postponement, but the decision is not risk-free (James and Alihodzic 2020). Labelled the ‘postponement paradox’, such a delay could result in innovative alternatives but could also compromise electoral management quality, deliberation, contestation, and participation. There could be increasing distrust in electoral processes and democratic institutions exacerbated by the increase in executive powers to instigate emergency measures and the reduction in parliamentary oversight (see Rapeli and Saikkonen 2020; Landman and Splendore 2020; Gaskell and Stoker 2020; Flinders 2020).¹

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern justified her decision to delay New Zealand’s 2020 general election by the need to ensure voter and candidate safety and to make it possible for parties to campaign fairly. The Electoral Commission was also keenly cognisant of the complexities and challenges that the initial Covid-19 state of emergency announcement and Alert Level 4 conditions presented to the conduct of the 2020 election.² If in-person voting was perceived as unsafe, and if alternative voting measures proved inadequate, this could have led to reduced turnout, a decline in confidence in the quality of election management, and potentially a questioning of the legitimacy of the election (Electoral Commission 2021; James and Alihodzic 2020).

To avoid these potentially harmful outcomes, the Electoral Commission immediately began reviewing the election planning process that was already under way. Advance voting in supermarket foyers had been introduced in 2017 and was to be expanded into other high-traffic locations. But this was potentially less viable if voters were required to socially distance or remain in their homes. While postal voting is used for local elections, introducing this option for national elections would have required a legislative change with a 75 per cent majority in parliament. Even if passed, it would have involved significant logistical investment. Nor was it deemed feasible to extend the system used by overseas voters who log in online and print out voting papers and a declaration, the completion of which requires an in-person witness. In addition, the commission had already identified the need for increased

1 We do not include a question on mistrust in the NZES, so have not canvassed the mistrust literature here.

2 Under Level 1 there were no domestic restrictions; Level 2 included some limits on gatherings and involved social distancing; Level 3 increased restrictions on gatherings and travel; while Level 4 allowed only essential travel and all gatherings were banned. Levels 3 and 4 are viewed as equivalent to a form of lockdown.

levels of security to prevent cyber and physical threats and disinformation campaigns, precluding consideration of electronic voting options, even had those been possible to implement in the time available.

In response to this multitude of challenges, the Electoral Commission made several changes that would enable in-person voting under Alert Level 2 conditions of group gathering limits and social distancing, while scaling up remote voting services for those most at risk of illness. Larger numbers of and more spacious voting places were provided. Education campaigns suggested that voters bring their own pen and vote close to home to avoid the need to cast a more time-consuming special vote outside their electorate. Single-use pens were also provided and the advance voting period was increased to include an additional weekend. In consultation with the Ministry of Health, a range of safety protocols were put in place, many of which were already familiar to New Zealanders. In addition, procedures were put in place to facilitate 340,000 remote voters, which involved temporary amendments to electoral regulations to allow voters to apply for remote voting by phone, and discretion for the commission to waive the need for a witness if home visits became high risk. An additional NZ\$28 million was requested by the Minister of Justice to support these provisions, which supplemented a previously allocated \$8 million.

These initiatives complemented two legal changes that were in train before Covid-19 but which also had the potential to expand enrolment and increase turnout. In June 2020, an amendment to the *Electoral (Registration of Sentenced Prisoners) Act* came into force and allowed for the re-enfranchisement of prisoners serving sentences of less than three years. Three months earlier, an amendment had been passed that enabled election day enrolment for voters in New Zealand. In 2017, the Electoral Commission processed more than 200,000 enrolment transactions during the advance voting period of which more than 94,000 were made in the last three days of the advance voting period.

Previous research has found that requiring enrolment well in advance of voting can pose a barrier for some groups, including young people who frequently move between addresses (Galicki 2018a, 2018b). In the case of New Zealand, previous enrolment settings had effectively made voting a two-step task that required planning, rather than a single task that could be done spontaneously. Alongside the law change, the commission increased its use of text messaging to reach people who had moved homes and made improvements to its digital enrolment processes. Digital enrolment

transactions increased from 8 per cent in 2017 to 56 per cent in 2020, while 80,000 people used the single-step enrolment-voting option. This could have included about 5,000 newly eligible voters who turned 18 because of the delay.

One challenge remained unsolved, with some New Zealanders living overseas raising concerns about their ability to cast a vote in 2020. Citizens are eligible to vote if they have been in New Zealand within the three years before the election; for permanent residents, the requirement is within 12 months. The rationale behind these criteria is that returning to New Zealand within the time frame demonstrates a physical connection to the country. However, border closures in March 2020 meant the three-year eligibility period was reduced by seven months, and some overseas New Zealanders reported they could not enter the country due to travel restrictions, managed isolation availability, and costs, leading to them being ineligible to vote (Every Kiwi Vote Counts 2021). The need for a printer with scanning capacity was an additional barrier for overseas voters during the pandemic since those who did not have this equipment at home were unable to access it at another location due to restrictions. Disabled overseas voters faced additional barriers (Kelly-Costello 2021). Indeed, now travel restrictions have been removed there are concerns some citizens and permanent residents overseas who face financial, health, and logistical barriers to travelling home will be disenfranchised from voting in the 2023 general election. To address this, the Treasury has made a case for a temporary change to eligibility criteria for overseas voters in 2023.³

While the change of election date created some logistical challenges for the implementation of the election, the Electoral Commission has maintained it had a positive effect on the campaign to increase enrolments. The commission used the extra time to reconnect with community partners, undertake additional digital and in-person events, and design a digital strategy to communicate the location of new and existing voting places. The commission 'used data driven advertising displayed on 290 outdoor digital screens across the country and, on mobile phones, showing people how far they were from the nearest voting place on a map' (Electoral Commission 2021, 25). The aim of this campaign was to reach unenrolled voters and reduce the costs of searching for local voting places.

3 A number of the issues raised here are also being considered by an Independent Electoral Review Panel set up (in 2022) to review a large range of electoral law provisions.

In this way, the Electoral Commission intentionally sought to undertake critical initiatives to limit the risks to electoral integrity associated with postponement recommended by analysts (James and Alihodzic 2020). These initiatives included transparency and inclusiveness in the decision to postpone and in the procedures to be followed. The analysts recommended low-tech solutions like advance voting, along with maintaining access to quality information and ensuring opportunities for a diversity of viewpoints from trusted media sources. Not all initiatives were within the Electoral Commission's remit, but their proposed plans were deemed acceptable by the government and the parliamentary parties consulted in the process of implementation.

Election results, data from the Electoral Commission's post-election survey, and the NZES indicate that the quality and integrity of the 2020 election were maintained despite the pandemic, and the services delivered by the commission were well received by voters. The number of disallowed votes fell from 6 per cent in 2017 to 2 per cent in 2020 (11,000 votes, down from 27,000). Confidence in the Electoral Commission's fairness and impartiality increased to 87 per cent and 85 per cent, respectively—up from 78 per cent and 79 per cent in 2017 (Electoral Commission 2021). Alongside this, satisfaction with the privacy of the voting screen increased from 69 per cent rating it as excellent in 2017 to 74 per cent in 2020. Voting screens were placed further apart to comply with social distancing and this could have allayed some migrant communities' fears regarding secrecy and voting (Galicki 2018b). In 2020, Asian voters' satisfaction with the voting screens increased to 75 per cent—up from 59 per cent in 2017.

Extending the advance voting period resulted in a historically high 68 per cent of voters (almost two million) choosing this option. Figure 4.1 compares the accumulation of advance votes over the equivalent days of the three campaigns, pegged to the 2020 dates. This great increase in advance voting mitigated the public health risks by spreading out the numbers at voting places and had the added benefit of reducing the incidence of people having to queue: 31 per cent in 2017 to 22 per cent in 2020 (Kantar 2020). Uncertainty about possible changes to Covid-19 alert levels that could result in further restrictions and the perceived risk of getting sick influenced the significant increase in advance voting. Those aged over 60 were more likely to cast an early vote than younger age groups, but there was a pronounced increase in advance voting across all age groups.

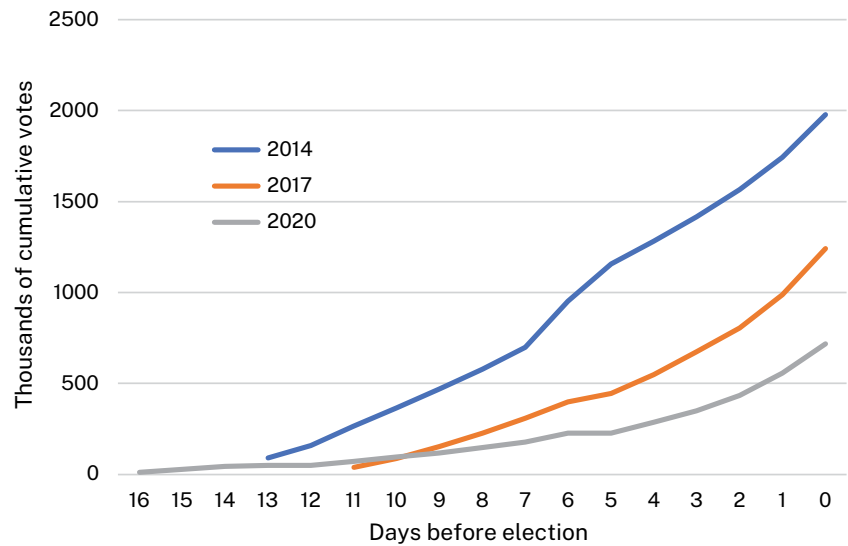


Figure 4.1 Cumulative advance votes in 2014, 2017, and 2020

Source: Electoral Commission (2022).

In its review of the 2020 election, the Electoral Commission recommended that there be legal recognition for advance voting with a minimum prescribed period, and that applying for a special vote by phone be an ongoing option. Digitising the processes associated with casting postal, dictation, and takeaway votes was also resolved to be a valuable next step to allow for scalability and greater efficiencies in future crises (Electoral Commission 2021, 2).

In 2021, New Zealand was held up as an example of how elections can be credibly managed under the restrictions imposed by Covid-19 in the International IDEA’s Asia-Pacific report (International IDEA 2021). Many other countries in the region experienced democratic backsliding.

Indeed, satisfaction with democracy in New Zealand greatly increased between the two elections: from 64 per cent to 77 per cent among those in the 2017 to 2020 NZES panels, respectively. Satisfaction with democracy tends to be associated with those happy with the result of an election (Blais and Gélinau 2007). The big vote for Labour would therefore increase the number of those satisfied for that reason. More generally, satisfaction with democracy reflects how well people feel a democratic regime works in practice (Linde and Ekman 2003). Satisfaction with democracy also correlates with approval of the Covid-19 response, but causality probably

runs in both directions. Cross-nationally, it is found most in countries where political institutions are transparent, responsive, and free of corruption (Foa et al. 2020). The increase in satisfaction with democracy in New Zealand in 2020 puts it at one of the highest levels in the world.

However, this increase in confidence was not reflected across a range of attitudes related to external political efficacy: the idea that politicians are responsive to popular opinion. Most of these showed little or no movement from their 2017 settings.⁴ Figure 4.3 shows the comparison of agreement or disagreement with a very optimistic statement expressing maximum political trust, 'Most politicians can be trusted', comparing the mean scores of a five-point scale, adjusted to run between zero and one hundred. The small difference is entirely within confidence intervals. New Zealanders are relatively evenly split between trust and distrust of politicians—a more positive balance than in many other countries (Vowles 2022, 5).

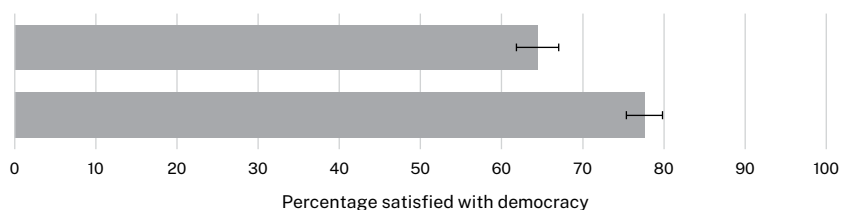


Figure 4.2 Change in satisfaction with democracy, 2017 and 2020

Note: The question was: 'How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in New Zealand?'

Source: Vowles et al. (2022a).

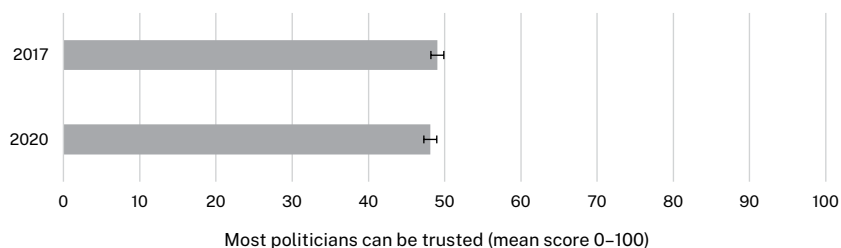


Figure 4.3 'Most politicians can be trusted', 2017 and 2020

Sources: Vowles et al. (2022a, 2022b).

⁴ These statements include 'Most MPs are out of touch with the rest of the country', on which agreement increased between 2017 and 2020; 'People like me don't have any say about what the government does', little or no difference; 'Voting makes a big difference/not any difference to what happens', no change; and 'I don't think politicians and public servants care what people like me think', no change.

While support for the Labour government's handling of the pandemic and trust in Ardern are likely to have enhanced turnout and satisfaction with democracy, this brief overview suggests adjustments to the electoral administration process did nothing to reduce and probably facilitated continued relative trust and confidence in, and satisfaction with, New Zealand's democratic process during Covid-19. But the underlying pattern of attitudes about politicians in general remained remarkably unaffected.

Campaigning and canvassing during Covid-19

Before the prime minister's announcement to delay the election, most political parties had begun to campaign around the country. However, the re-emergence of community transmission threw the election campaign into a kind of limbo, with Auckland moving to Alert Level 3, with Level 2 for the rest of New Zealand. Opposition parties had indicated their concern about a fair election if political parties were not free to campaign. ACT leader David Seymour claimed candidates and voters in Auckland were 'effectively under house arrest' and having the prime minister fronting daily Covid-19 press briefings meant it was no longer a level playing field (Curtin and Greaves 2020).

However, our analysis of NZES responses indicates that despite political parties being unable to hold political events such as campaign launches, meet-and-greets in malls or on the street, and door-to-door canvassing, they did not appear to improve their direct contact with voters electronically during the campaign. The data go back to 2011, the election at which turnout hit its lowest level in New Zealand's electoral history since universal suffrage was introduced. We see increasing mobilisation efforts up to 2017 and, apart from the new media, a decline in 2020. In Figure 4.3, we see big drops in contact via telephone and visits in 2020 and only marginal increases in the use of online options compared with 2017. From this evidence, it is hard to infer that the turnout increase had anything to do with parties' efforts to make campaign contacts; overall, they were lower than in 2017 and probably lower than in 2014 as well.

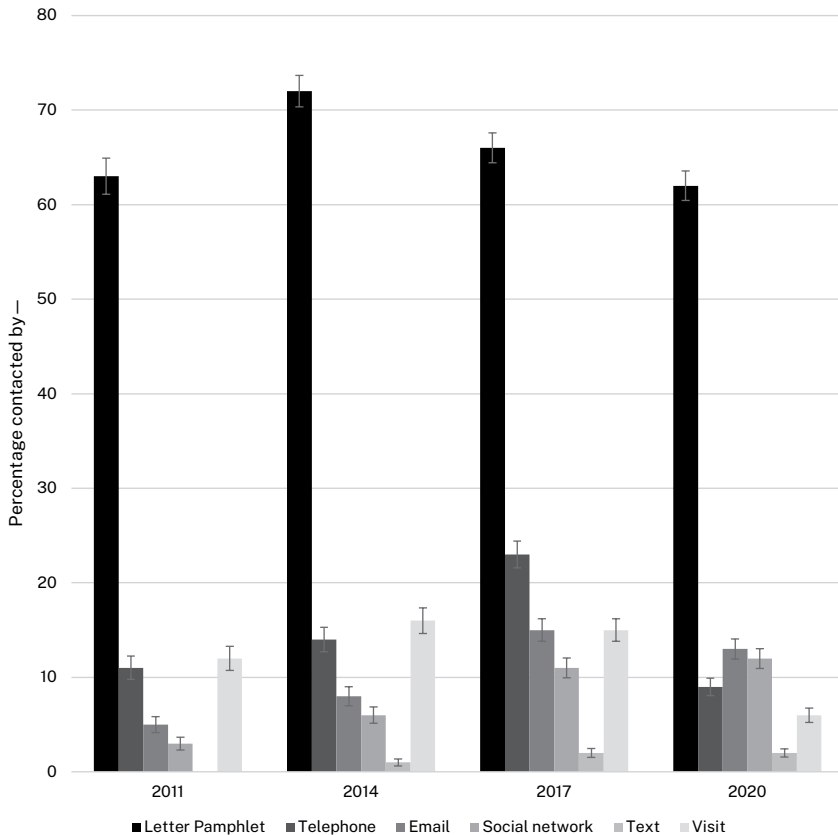


Figure 4.4 Campaign contacts by political parties, 2011–2020

Sources: Vowles et al. (2022a, 2022b).

The decline in phone contact could have been a result of Covid restrictions on volunteers working from call centres; letter or pamphlet contact also declined a little in 2020 (from 66 per cent to 62 per cent), perhaps because of reduced postal services (implemented before Covid-19). However, this form of contact remained the primary source for most respondents. Some pamphlets could have been dropped by party workers rather than through the mail. Nevertheless, despite the advent of lockdowns, there was no dramatic explosion in outreach by political parties to voters directly via non-traditional sources.⁵

⁵ We do not know whether parties were actively pursuing alternative online contact options that were not canvassed via the NZES.

The Electoral Commission's research indicates that awareness of electoral advertising increased from 52 per cent in 2017 to 72 per cent in 2020 and this increase was even more pronounced among younger voters—up from 43 per cent to 80 per cent (Kantar 2020). In addition, 27.5 per cent of NZES respondents visited the Electoral Commission's website before the 2020 election—up from 16.5 per cent in 2017. This improved awareness could have been a result of the increased presence of Electoral Commission advertising through social media although another possible factor is the sharp decrease in other advertising in 2020 that would otherwise have competed for voters' attention. Industries such as tourism and hospitality had markedly reduced their advertising given restrictions on travel, business activities, and gatherings (Nothling-Demmer 2020).

In New Zealand, the Electoral Commission's Kantar survey found that 15 per cent of eligible voters said that Covid-19 made them more likely to vote while only 1 per cent said that Covid-19 made them less likely to do so (Kantar 2020). Given there was a marked decline in domestic mobility due to restrictions and more people working from home (Green et al. 2020), we might expect that this forced reduction of activity freed up extra time to engage with election information and vote. In other words, it is possible that the pandemic removed the 'life getting in the way' barrier to voting (Galicki 2018b). The percentage of nonvoters who did not vote due to being overseas at the time also decreased to 0 per cent, from 5 per cent in 2017, as international travel was severely limited (Kantar 2020).

NZES data can help us here: according to these conjectures, interest in politics and attention to the media for political news should have increased. But interest in politics was, if anything, slightly down overall. A small 6–7-point shift from 'somewhat interested' to 'very interested' is slightly concealed in the summary data. As for attention to politics in the media, overall, it was slightly up in 2020. But these are small differences: given the rise in turnout, one would have expected more.

Finally, the high level of compliance with lockdown measures and high support for how the government handled the outbreak could have had a spill-over effect into a greater propensity towards following the law in general. While in 2017 only 17 per cent said that the reason for initially enrolling was 'you have to, it's the law', in 2020, 33 per cent gave this as the reason for enrolling (Kantar 2020). As Figure 4.5 reports, when asked, somewhat more than half of our participants said that for them voting was a duty, not just a choice. However, there is no comparable question from the 2017 study.

4. MOBILISING VOTERS FROM THE 'TEAM OF FIVE MILLION'

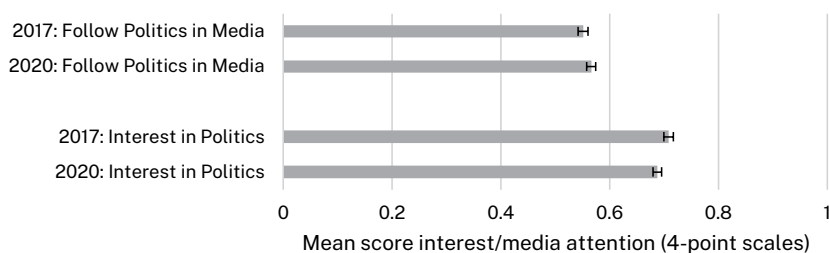


Figure 4.5 Interest in politics and attention to the media, 2017 and 2020

Sources: Vowles et al. (2022a, 2022b).

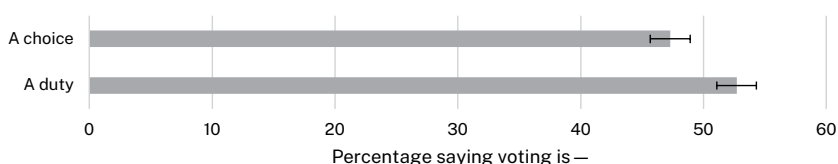


Figure 4.6 Voting as a choice or a duty

Source: Vowles et al. (2022a).

The mobilising effect of the referendums

In 2020, New Zealand's general election was accompanied by two high-profile referendum questions. One asked voters whether they endorsed the passage of the *End of Life Choice Act 2019*, which gave people with a terminal illness the option of requesting an assisted death. The second asked voters whether they supported the proposed Cannabis Legalisation and Control Bill, which if passed would legalise the recreational use of cannabis. While the end-of-life referendum passed easily with 65.1 per cent in favour of the Act coming into force, the cannabis referendum received only 48.4 per cent support (Oldfield and Greaves 2021).

As noted earlier, there is evidence that high-profile referendums concurrent with general representative elections can increase voter turnout. The Kantar post-election survey indicated some support for this argument, with 8 per cent of young people who voted in the general election saying they voted only because of the referendums, but the question did not specify which referendum (Kantar 2020). As it is unlikely that young people were highly motivated by a question that was of much more interest to the elderly, one can infer they were more interested in the choice proposed on cannabis.

Indeed, young people are more likely than older people to be cannabis users (Ministry of Health 2015). Most polling taken on the issue found they were more likely to support cannabis legalisation (for example, Vowles 2020).

The cannabis referendum was also highly significant to Māori due to the disproportionate harm existing cannabis laws have on them. Experts argued that legalising cannabis would result in fewer Māori arrests but legalisation would have to be balanced with support measures and regulation (NZ Drug Foundation 2020). Immediately before the referendum, support for cannabis law reform was significantly higher among Māori than among the general population. Opinion polls conducted in 2019 and 2020 indicated about 75 per cent of Māori supported cannabis legalisation (Dempster and Norris 2022).

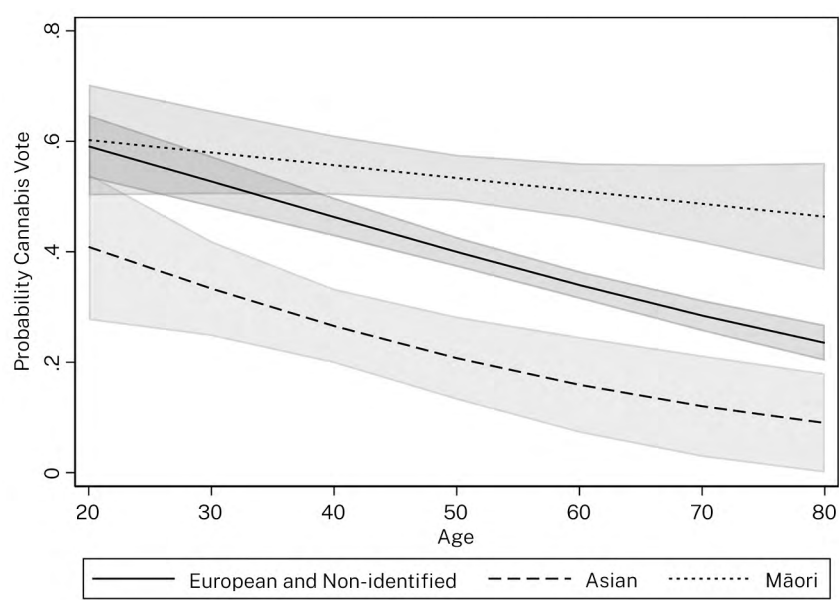


Figure 4.7 The probability of voting in favour of the legalisation of cannabis by age and ethnicity

Source: Appendix Table A4.1: Model 2.

Appendix Table A4.1 reports analysis of the two referendum votes by age and main ethnic group. Figure 4.7 displays the estimates derived from the cannabis model. The end-of-life referendum vote was only weakly affected by age and ethnicity; indeed, age had no significant effect on the vote. Asian and Pasifika people were somewhat more likely to oppose the introduction of assisted death for people who qualified by way of a terminal illness.

Age and ethnicity were much more associated with the cannabis vote. Ethnicity is here defined by priority, removing multiple identifications to simplify the analysis. All Māori identifiers are coded as Māori, and Pasifika who do not identify with Māori are coded as Pasifika, disregarding any other non-Māori identifications. Those who identify with an Asian ethnicity are coded similarly, leaving a residual group most of whom are of European ethnicity. While policy-relevant research in New Zealand is moving away from this approach, if used with caution, it is recognised as being useful for understanding the relationship between ethnicity and outcomes (Boven et al. 2020).

The number of Pasifika in our sample is too small for statistical significance although their opinions seem to have been closer to those of Māori than to the European/other population. Young Māori and young people in the European/residual group are equally likely to have favoured legalisation—at about 60 per cent. Asian identifiers are much less likely to have supported legalisation, although their young were more prone to do so, with about 40 per cent voting in favour. Following the age gradient, age had little effect on Māori, who remained in favour of legalisation into older age groups. But older people in the Asian and European/residual groups were much less likely to support legalisation, with the oldest being particularly opposed. Here is some further *prima facie* evidence that youth turnout could have been affected by the cannabis referendum.

However, inferring whether the cannabis referendum enhanced turnout or not is more difficult than it might at first seem. We can gauge interest in the referendums from those who visited a website established by the Electoral Commission to provide basic information. But this means we cannot distinguish between the effects of the two referendums. However, no one has suggested a turnout effect for the end-of-life referendum. There is no obvious reason why there should have been one. It was much less sharply contested and the practical benefits of change were relevant to only a small minority—although for those affected it was very important.

Of more concern, a simple correlation between those reporting visiting the referendum's website and electoral turnout proves little or nothing; many who visited were intending to vote anyway. We must apply multivariate regression analysis, allowing us to control for other factors that could dispose people towards voting: age, income, ethnic identity, previous vote, closeness to a political party, and whether people feel there is a duty to vote or not (for more details, see Appendix Table A4.2).

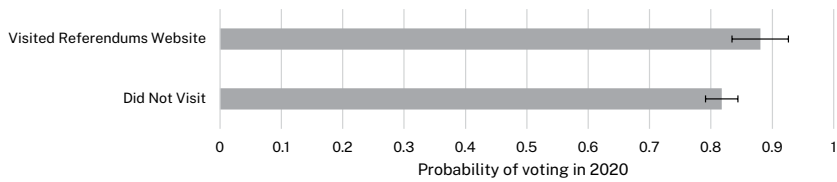


Figure 4.8 The effect of interest in the referendums on turnout in 2020

Source: Estimates derived from Appendix Table A4.2, net of the effects of all other variables in the model.

As displayed in Figure 4.8, estimates derived from this model tell us that people who visited the referendum’s website were 6 per cent more likely to vote than those who did not, taking all these other matters into account. This is just significant at the 95 per cent level—in 19 of 20 possible samples we could hypothetically have taken—and the confidence intervals only very marginally overlap.

One further problem remains. Methodologically, whether people visited the site is a ‘treatment effect’. Statistically speaking, such effects should be random, not intentional, as such a visit clearly was. A possible problem of self-selection bias towards confirmation of the effect on voting or not voting remains, even despite the controls in the regression. Fortunately, a statistical test is available to check whether such a bias remains: a recursive bivariate probit model, which tests two models—one with the visit as outcome variable and the other on voting or not (Marra and Radice 2011). Residuals from these models did not significantly correlate, indicating no significant selection bias. The estimate from our model can stand.

Our data indicate that nearly half of those aged between 18 and 24 visited the referendum’s website, compared with 15 per cent or fewer of those aged 70 and over. However, there was no apparent difference in people’s propensity to vote by age associated with visiting the website. However, visiting the site did enhance turnout, and it was visited much more by the young than the elderly. About 26 per cent of the NZES participants visited the referendum’s site, but across the whole electorate, this means that the overall turnout effect could have been at best a modest 1.5 per cent. If there was a strong youth mobilisation in tandem with the cannabis referendum, this seems small. However, the cannabis referendum could have motivated young people to vote regardless of whether they visited the referendum’s website.

Conclusion

This chapter proposed three possible explanations for the turnout increase at the 2020 general election. The first rested on the high level of electoral integrity and the resources of trust and confidence in New Zealand's democratic process, and in its Electoral Commission. This made it possible for politicians and administrators to rise to the challenge of the Covid-19 crisis, taking the postponed election in their stride. We provide a wealth of qualitative data and secondary survey analysis from the Electoral Commission to underpin this claim. Voters had no reason to fear catching Covid-19 when they went to vote. The government's elimination strategy had reduced the risk to a microscopic level and the provision of extensive advance voting and the relative absence of crowding in voting places reduced it even further. But if this claim is convincing as an explanation of an absence of turnout decline, it does not work so well for its increase. Levels of trust in politicians remained much as they were in 2017: relatively high by international standards, although far from perfect.

The second potential explanation posits that the election 'mattered', reinforcing perceptions that elections are important, and encouraging greater engagement between voters and politicians. However, such engagement did not happen directly between parties and voters; campaign contacts were lower than at previous elections and small increases in electronic engagement do not appear to have filled the gap. High levels of compliance with government restrictions could have encouraged a greater sense of collective solidarity. Restrictions could have given people more time to think about politics and the democratic process and engage with the process themselves through the mainstream and social media. Some evidence from Electoral Commission data suggests that a significant number of people thought their Covid-19 experience had made them more likely to vote. However, small shifts in attention to the media and interest in politics do not support the idea that engagement and interest increased significantly.

The NZES dataset is better able to test the third potential explanation: that of a referendum effect. Visiting the referendum's website did show a significant effect, even after controls were applied and with a more robust statistical test for a possible selection effect. Political efficacy and agreement with a civic norm underpinning the vote also play a large part. However, political efficacy, as measured by perceptions of the effectiveness of the vote, did not shift between 2017 and 2020. Neither interest in politics nor attention to the

media has significant effects on the model when added to alternative versions. On balance, the best evidence is for our third explanation, although a broader engagement is not entirely ruled out in our findings.

As it grew near, what this would mean for the election in 2023 was a matter for speculation. If a sense of crisis prompted engagement in 2020, this was lacking in 2023. Moreover, there was no high-profile referendum to attract young and new voters. Polling in late 2022 hinted at a competitive election in 2023, which could have boosted turnout at the margins. Research indicates that competitiveness at the previous election has a lagged effect on turnout (Vowles 2014). The 2020 election was spectacularly uncompetitive. After three elections at which turnout has increased, the 2023 election was most likely to see a regression towards the mean. There remained a hope—strong among youthful social movement activists—that the young are the vanguard of progressive change, that they will continue to vote in larger numbers, and that a new generation will enrich the political process and underpin significant advances in social justice and the fight against climate change. No one can deny the importance of such aspirations.

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Appendix 4.1

Table A4.1 Age and ethnicity and the two referendum votes

Logistic regression	(1) Cannabis	(2) Cannabis	(3) End of life	(4) End of life
Age	-0.023*** (0.003)	-0.026*** (0.003)	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.003)
Asian	-0.805*** (0.186)	-0.604 (0.531)	-0.685*** (0.181)	-1.025** (0.480)
Pasifika	0.153 (0.349)	-0.852 (0.843)	-1.113*** (0.349)	-0.772 (0.873)
Māori	0.440*** (0.123)	-0.281 (0.376)	-0.250** (0.120)	-0.463 (0.368)
Asian*Age		-0.007 (0.013)		0.008 (0.010)
Pasifika*Age		0.025 (0.018)		-0.009 (0.018)
Māori*Age		0.016** (0.007)		0.005 (0.007)
Constant	0.748*** (0.156)	0.883*** (0.176)	0.623*** (0.164)	0.675*** (0.188)
Observations	3,618	3,618	3,618	3,618
Pseudo r ²	0.0424	0.0449	0.0124	0.0128
ll	-2,333	-2,327	-2,410	-2,409

*** p < 0.01

** p < 0.05

* p < 0.1

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table A4.2 Identifying the effects of interest in the referendums on turnout

Logistic regression	Voted	Logistic regression	Voted
Voted in 2017	0.859*** (0.234)	University degree (no degree)	0.084 (0.246)
Age	0.026*** (0.006)	Voting is a choice, not a duty	-0.940*** (0.222)
Closeness to party	0.174 (0.109)	Visited referendums site	0.648** (0.320)
Household income	0.005** (0.002)	No internet access	-0.632* (0.379)
Assets	-0.085 (0.080)	Visited no site for information	-0.134 (0.256)
Female (male)	0.114 (0.216)	Voting makes a difference	0.383*** (0.078)
(European/other)		Visited party or candidate site	0.935*** (0.314)
Asian	-0.335 (0.340)	Constant	-1.817*** (0.516)
Pasifika	-1.508** (0.587)	Observations	3,301
Māori	-0.385 (0.237)	Pseudo r ²	0.248
		ll	-1,105

*** p < 0.01

** p < 0.05

* p < 0.1

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. The challenge in the analysis reported here is to test the possible effect in robust fashion without overloading the model. Several other control variables were added and discarded because they were not statistically significant, did not add appreciably to the fit of the model, and had no effect on the ‘treatment’. These included interest in politics, the extent of following politics in the media, satisfaction with democracy, trust in politicians, trust in Jacinda Ardern, approval or disapproval of the Covid-19 response, and emotions about the Covid-19 response. While several of these are positively correlated with the choice to vote or not, their effects are absorbed by a combination of habitual voting (voted in 2017), civic norms (voting is a choice or a duty), and political efficacy (voting makes a difference).

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