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Who Belongs in the ‘Team of Five Million’? Immigration and the 2020 election

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Introduction

The 2020 New Zealand general election took place during a period of closed borders, near-zero immigration, and an all-consuming focus on the domestic and international impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Things were very different three years earlier: migration into New Zealand had reached record highs and, in the broader context of concerns about the country’s infrastructural capacity, immigration was an issue of growing importance to voters at that year’s election (McMillan and Gibbons 2020).

In this chapter, we ask whether Covid-19 and the associated disruptions impacted New Zealanders’ views about immigration. First, we compare public opinion about immigration in 2020 with that in previous elections and, second, we examine what voters thought future immigration into New Zealand should look like, including which kinds of immigrants they wanted to see enter the country once the border reopened. We also examine whether the factors found to be important determinants of opinions about immigration in previous elections remained important in 2020.

We find a clear reduction in the salience of immigration between 2017 and 2020, which we attribute not just to the relatively greater importance voters placed on pandemic-related issues (such as health) but also to the dramatic

drop in inward migration in the months leading up to the election. In other respects, public opinion about immigration remained relatively stable. This general stability of opinion sits alongside both a perceptible decrease in the proportion of voters who worried about the cultural and economic consequences of immigration and some hardening of opinion among those wanting immigration reduced. Looking to future immigration policy, we find public opinion to be broadly supportive of most types of immigration, with the notable exception of the investor category, which a large majority of participants oppose. Beyond views about which immigrants should be granted access to the labour market, there is some reluctance to allow non-resident foreign buyers into the housing market and to provide immigrants with access to welfare.

The chapter first details immigration policy and patterns ahead of the 2020 election. It then examines pre-pandemic and emerging literature on how public opinion about immigration is affected by events such as pandemics. A third section presents our findings and, in the final section, we consider implications for future immigration policy.

Immigration policy and politics in 2020: Setting the context

On 19 March 2020, the New Zealand Government shut the country's border to almost all non-citizen and non-permanent residents (Knight 2021). The Team of Five Million was now sealed off from the rest of the world and, by November 2020, a drop of 98 per cent in overall arrivals to New Zealand was reported (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment 2020). Annual net migration was less than 10,000 by early 2021, contrasting dramatically with net migration of almost 92,000 in the year to March 2020 (Infometrics 2021).¹ There was a similar dramatic decline in migration globally after the initial flurry of people trying to travel before borders shut. Permanent migration to OECD countries, for example, fell by more than 30 per cent in 2020, to the lowest levels seen in almost two decades, with particular impacts on family migration (OECD 2021). New Zealand was, nonetheless, unusual in that its border closure halted whole classes of migration—notably, of international student, working holidaymaker, and other temporary work visa categories.

1 Citizens returning to New Zealand after the pandemic broke out dominated incoming long-term flows.

Even before the pandemic, some changes in immigration patterns and policy had been emerging. The previous National-led government had, in its last year of office (2017), already placed restrictions on some work visas and begun removing the 'residents-in-waiting' logic of temporary migration categories (Woodhouse 2017). The briefing to the incoming Minister of Immigration after the 2017 election emphasised that significant growth in temporary migration flows over the previous two decades had placed pressure on the residence program and could 'work against the Government's wider objectives for the integrity of the immigration system and the labour market' (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment 2017, 4–5). Indeed, temporary work visa holders had come to make up almost 5 per cent of the country's labour force—the highest in the OECD by some distance (Office of the Minister of Immigration 2021).

In line with officials' advice, in 2017, Jacinda Ardern's Labour–New Zealand First government signalled it would address the emerging bottleneck on the permanent migration pathway, as well as reduce immigration levels overall. It had taken only limited steps in this direction—including adjustment to post-study visas, family migration, and work on migrant exploitation—before Covid-19 and the related border closure upended its plans. Policy work had also been underway in housing—an area associated with immigration pressure. Labour had made numerous campaign pledges in this area, given the prolonged crisis of housing availability and affordability and the importance voters placed on it in 2017 (Vowles and Curtin 2020, 43). As well as promising to build 100,000 affordable homes, reduce homelessness, and shrink social housing waiting lists, Labour signalled it would ban 'foreign buyers' from purchasing existing housing (Davison 2017) to try to reduce competition for residential properties and, in turn, slow price increases. As the 2020 election neared, however, the government had reportedly built few of the promised 'KiwiBuild' homes and house prices had risen steeply (Taylor 2020).² Legislation had, however, been introduced to stop most 'non-residents' from purchasing residential properties.³ Across immigration and related policy areas, then, the Labour–New Zealand First government had begun making changes in response to challenges associated with rapid

2 Median house prices rose 11 per cent in the year to September 2020 (Taylor 2020).

3 After this law was passed, non-residents were required to apply to the Overseas Investment Commission for permission to purchase residential property. Australian and Singaporean citizens were exempt from these rules due to bilateral economic and trade agreements. 'Non-resident' in this case meant not just people on a resident visa living overseas, but also those living in New Zealand on a non-residence class visa. Students and other temporary visa holders were not generally eligible to apply for permission (New Zealand Treasury 2018).

and sustained growth in temporary migration over decades. Nonetheless, apparent indecision about specific changes and further increases in the backlog of residency applications attracted criticism (RNZ 2019b); by late 2019, tens of thousands of migrants lived with uncertainty as they waited on residency decisions (Bonnnett 2019).

The pandemic context of almost zero immigration gave the government an opportunity to more radically reshape immigration policy. In the short term, it adopted reactive emergency measures to address issues arising from the closed border, including periodic extensions to visas close to expiry, variation of conditions on some visas (for example, allowing working holidaymakers to move to a special seasonal work visa; Faafoi 2020), and some minimal welfare provisions for migrants stranded in New Zealand.⁴ While providing short-term relief for visa holders in New Zealand, and for employers struggling to find workers, these measures were criticised as piecemeal and unpredictable, ignoring the plight of visa holders stranded offshore when the border closed, and still not addressing the many thousands in the residency application queue when the pandemic broke out (Bonnnett 2020a).

With the government slow to commit to reform of the troubled immigration system, or to offer residence certainty to whole categories of migrants, the perception of an immigration ‘policy hole’ arose (Fonseka 2020b). Yet, a broader step-change was in the works. Cabinet papers and policy documents from mid-2020 show policymakers’ thoughts turning to ‘post-pandemic’ immigration and foreshadowing the immigration ‘reset’ eventually announced in May 2021.⁵ Stating that ‘when our borders fully open again, we can’t afford to simply turn on the tap to the previous immigration settings’ (Nash and Faafoi 2021), the government signalled substantial reform of skilled migration and, especially, temporary migration—the category whose numbers had doubled in the previous decade. Immigration minister Kris Faafoi told employers they would need to rethink their reliance on foreign workers and that the government had to prioritise New Zealanders for work and training instead (Bonnnett 2020b). In immigration, as in post-Covid

4 *The Immigration (COVID-19 Response) Amendment Act 2020* introduced extensive time-limited powers to grant visas and to amend visa conditions and duration for whole classes of visa holders (Lees-Galloway 2020).

5 The 2020 post-election briefing restated the ‘one-off’ opportunity to ‘reset’ labour market and immigration settings that Covid-19 border closures provided, mentioning specifically the need for a ‘reset of skilled residence settings’ (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment 2020, 5).

tourism and international education, future policy was expected to focus on 'higher value and lower volume strategies' (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment 2020, 5).

Commitment to an immigration 'rethink' also appeared in Labour's 2020 election manifesto, which stated a desire to 'make the most of the opportunity provided' by Covid-related disruptions to 'update' immigration settings (Labour Party 2020). Short on details, the manifesto promised to 'review immigration criteria to enable a broader range of workers to enter New Zealand', to continue work on family migration and migrant exploitation, and to establish a new 'Investment Attraction Strategy to encourage targeted and high-value international investment into New Zealand' (Labour Party 2020). Labour increasingly faced a dilemma familiar to centre-left parties internationally: how to respond both to their traditional working-class base, some of whom see immigrants as undermining their working conditions and access to resources, and to those among their supporters who emphasise immigration as a human right and a matter of global solidarity. Labour had been largely shielded from this dilemma by the long period of bipartisan support for immigration as a key plank of economic management and stimulation, extant since the late 1980s. With the breakdown of this consensus, it was more difficult for Labour to either downplay immigration or avoid adopting a clear stance on the issue, both of which are strategies employed by left-wing parties elsewhere (Odmalm and Bale 2015; Carvalho and Ruedin 2020).

Apart from the Green Party, the other main political parties were also short on immigration policy details ahead of the election beyond statements of broad values. Most indicated continuity with previous policy positions. National, Labour, and ACT all expressed continued support for the investor category targeted at high-wealth migrants with capital to invest, whereas the Green Party sought to clamp down on this category (Bonnett 2020b). New Zealand First called most explicitly for a 'fundamental rethink' of policy, arguing that the pre-pandemic scale of immigration 'belongs to another era' (New Zealand First 2020). It advocated for regionalised immigration, caps on some categories, policy oriented more tightly around skill shortage lists, and a population plan. While ACT declared itself 'pro-immigration', it nonetheless aligned with New Zealand First in areas such as 'trimming back overly generous' pension entitlements for immigrants and seeking to require new migrants to sign up to 'New Zealand's values' (ACT 2020). The Green Party's detailed policy platform was notable for its rights focus. It sought further increases in the refugee quota, liberalised residency rules for family

members of immigrants, and removal of the ties binding temporary workers to employers, which it argued led to migrant exploitation (Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand 2020). Across the parties, however, discussion of immigration during the election campaign focussed little on future policy settings. Instead, parties debated border-related issues, such as how best to allocate places in the country's managed isolation and quarantine system and which migrants should receive exemptions to cross a border otherwise firmly shut to those who were neither citizens nor permanent residents (Bonnnett 2020b).

Given the many interruptions to business-as-usual immigration caused by the pandemic, we cannot take for granted that the factors usually found to shape voters' attitudes to immigration would exert the same influence in 2020. In the next section, we discuss these factors and identify some expectations about how Covid-19 could affect voters' opinions on immigration.

The effect of major events on immigration attitudes

What effects might we expect the Covid-19 pandemic—with its cascading health, economic, demographic, social, and political consequences—to have on how New Zealanders feel about immigration? In this section, we examine historical literature on the relationship between health and other crises and immigration attitudes, as well as the emerging literature on the Covid-19 pandemic's effects on public opinion about immigration. We explore this literature for its insights into three possible effects of the pandemic on attitudes about immigration: first, that Covid-19 would make people more hostile to immigrants and less open to immigration; second, that it would make people more accepting of immigrants and immigration; and third, that Covid-19 would have little lasting effect on people's opinions about immigrants and immigration.

Historical support for the claim that a pandemic will harden public opinion towards immigration and immigrants can be found in the experience of the 1918 flu epidemic, which is credited with increasing anti-immigrant attitudes in the United States (Eun Kim et al. 2022; Lee et al. 2022; Markel and Stern 2002). Anthropological and psychological theories claim that the spread of disease can lead to the rise of anti-immigrant, xenophobic

sentiment, with scholars in the 1960s arguing that societies tend to blame 'outsiders' when faced with a biological threat such as a highly infectious disease (Douglas 1966). More recently, scholars have theorised that xenophobia is an 'evolutionary adaptation to disease' (Daniels et al. 2021), drawing on the behavioural immune system hypothesis to argue that exposure to the Covid-19 threat was associated with negative orientations towards immigrants (Freitag and Hofstetter 2022). Similarly, several nationalism scholars suggested the Covid-19 pandemic would inflame existing nationalist sentiment, possibly at the expense of ethnic minorities and other commonly 'othered' communities (Woods et al. 2020). Initial anecdotal evidence in New Zealand and elsewhere lends support to some of these claims: Chinese New Zealanders and other New Zealanders of Asian descent, for instance, reported being subjected to Covid-related racist abuse and attacks when the pandemic began (Leahy 2020; Tan 2021), and similar experiences were reported by Chinese people in many other countries (Jakovljevic et al. 2020).

Such xenophobia might be expected to translate into opposition to immigration flows. There is some support for this position in the emerging international literature. She et al. (2022) found increased xenophobia towards people from Wuhan among other Chinese nationals in China during the pandemic, while Daniels et al. (2021), in their study of Californians' attitudes towards immigration, diversity, and Asian-Americans during the early period of Covid-19, found 'selective support' for this hypothesis, mainly manifesting in an increase in crimes against Asian-Americans, although they considered this was more likely to be the product of 'politicians' authorisation of scapegoating' than wider racial hostility.

An alternative hypothesis is that Covid-19 would make public opinion more positive towards immigration and immigrants, especially given labour shortages and personal hardships arising from closed borders. There is not a lot of support for this hypothesis in the historical literature; existing studies that point to increasingly favourable attitudes instead identify a broader temporal effect by which attitudes liberalise over time, rather than as a reaction to a specific event. Thus, Boelhouwer et al.'s (2016) study found attitudes in European countries towards immigration and asylum became more generally favourable between 2002 and 2015. Other scholars observed attitudinal shifts in favour of immigration that could reflect a process of habituation to the presence of new immigrants despite initial backlash (Claassen and McLaren 2021) and that tracks generational change more broadly (McLaren and Paterson 2020). Lee et al.'s (2022) study,

however, found Covid-19 vulnerability (measured as fear of or anxiety about the pandemic) in five Asian countries to be positively associated with support for immigration post-pandemic. They attribute this surprising result to policy feedback: '[I]nstead of scapegoating out-groups and seeing immigration restrictions as costless protective measures, people concerned about COVID-19 are reminded of (1) the importance of cross-border collaboration in combating the disease, and (2) the economic cost of stringent border controls' (Lee et al. 2022).

The most persuasively articulated position in the literature, though, is the stability-of-opinion hypothesis. Lapinski et al. (1997), for example, argue that while opinions about immigration and immigrants vary significantly across *populations*,⁶ variation over *time* within populations tends to occur slowly, as Pryce (2018) also shows in the US context. Of particular interest are studies that have found this continuity of opinion even in the face of external shocks. Stockemer et al. (2020), for instance, found the movement of asylum-seekers into Europe between 2015 and 2017—commonly referred to as a 'crisis'—did not increase anti-immigrant sentiment, concluding that 'even under a strong external shock, fundamental political attitudes remain constant'. Hatton (2016) tested the effects of a different external shock, economic recession, on public attitudes to immigration in 20 European countries, finding that 'shifts in opinion have been remarkably mild'. Kustov et al. (2021, 1,479), confirming these findings of attitudinal stability even in the face of economic and political shocks, note that changes that do occur in response to external shocks tend to be small and of short duration as voters move back to their 'long-term equilibrium'.⁷

Taken together, these kinds of studies tend to support political socialisation theories of voter attitudes and behaviour, and suggest we should expect to see little, if any, change in immigration attitudes because of the pandemic. Indeed, some studies of the effect of the pandemic on public opinion about immigration during its first year provide initial support to the continuity hypothesis. Pickup et al. (2021) found that British attitudes towards immigration during the pandemic were strongly influenced by pre-pandemic views but noted that some existing views could be heightened.

6 A voluminous and theory-rich scholarship explains cross-national variation via individual and societal variables. For overviews of this literature, see Victor (2019); Freeman et al. (2013).

7 Conversely, Laaker (2023) argues that the experience of economic shock, in the form of a recession, during voters' formative years can have a long-lasting negative effect on attitudes to immigration. However, such long-term effects cannot be examined with the current data measuring opinions so soon after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Notably, anti-immigrant attitudes strengthened during the pandemic among Brexit voters (who already had more negative attitudes towards immigrants than did 'Remainers'), while Remainers' immigration attitudes remained relatively unchanged. In the US context, Daniels et al. (2021) similarly found only selective support for the contention that pandemics 'engender xenophobia' or reduce support for diversity.

A more general feature of recent pre-pandemic literature examining public views about immigration is the testing of complex relationships between individual variables and sociopolitical contexts. This literature points to the influence of a variety of mediating factors on immigration attitudes, including the presence or absence of state immigrant integration policies (Artiles and Meardi 2014; Neureiter 2021) and of right-wing parties, media framing (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009; Freeman et al. 2013; Haynes et al. 2016; McLaren et al. 2018), and elite framing (Bishin et al. 2021). Indeed, Lancaster (2022) shows that, while immigration attitudes are largely stable in the face of economic and political shocks, the change that does occur is primarily due to the *salience* of the immigration issue. This finding underlines the importance of how political elites frame issues, which is also apparent from Lee et al.'s (2022) study. Given the range of contextual variables at work in influencing public opinion, we could expect that the relatively low attention political parties gave to immigration (as opposed to border rules) in 2020 would similarly translate into lower salience of immigration in voters' minds and, thus, less opposition to immigration.

A further element of New Zealand's social and political context, and its possible effects on public opinion about immigration, is also important. Although the leadup to the 2020 election was dominated by the pandemic, New Zealand had experienced a different shock just a year earlier: the 15 March 2019 terror attack by a far-right gunman on the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, which killed 51 and injured 49 people. This attack produced an immediate government response that was praised for its compassion towards the targeted Muslim community, as well as law reforms to regulate firearms more tightly (RNZ 2019a; Roy 2019). Could the shock of this attack have contributed to voter attitudes to immigration in 2020? Consistent with the aftermath of a similar attack in Norway, studies so far have found higher levels of satisfaction with government (Satherley et al. 2021), and more positive attitudes towards Muslims (Shanaah et al. 2021), after these attacks. However, Shanaah et al. (2021) caution that the positive effects on attitudes towards Muslims

did not extend to other out-group minorities or to immigrants more generally. Second, the positive effects, which were also more pronounced among left-liberal voters, appeared to be of short duration overall. After an immediate boost in positive attitudes towards Muslim communities, and in support for the government, a return to baseline views was observed in the following two to three months (Shanaah et al. 2021).

Thus, like the findings outlined earlier in relation to the impact of exogenous crises like the pandemic, continuity (via a return to baseline attitudes) seems stronger than disruption. The Christchurch attack constituted a profound shock to New Zealand society and to the Muslim community, and elite discourse changed to a more inclusionary stance—notably, in the immediate aftermath. However, given the degree to which the pandemic subsequently crowded out other issues, the longer-term impact of the attack on attitudes to immigration is less certain and we would not expect attitudes to immigration to be substantially changed in the medium term.

Immigration attitudes in pandemic times: Findings

How much, then, did the pandemic affect attitudes to immigration by late 2020? Drawing on data from the NZES 2020 (and earlier NZESs), we turn now to examine public opinion towards immigration and the factors associated with opposition to, or support for, it, in the initial phase of the pandemic. We examine the extent to which people supported levels of immigration as they were before the pandemic and explore some of the factors associated with a desire to see immigration reduced, increased, or kept constant. In so doing, we seek to assess whether voters' attitudes towards immigration became more negative, more positive, or remained largely unchanged.

Our first query relates to a fundamental aspect of immigration: the ability of people to move across borders. We asked participants when they thought New Zealand's border should be reopened to students, tourists, and temporary workers from countries where there was community transmission of the Covid-19 virus. As Figure 6.1 shows, when questioned at the end of 2020, almost 90 per cent of New Zealanders did not want the border reopened unless certain conditions were met: those entering the country had gone through a 14-day quarantine and produced two negative test results

(51 per cent); a vaccine was available to protect New Zealanders against infection (30 per cent); or New Zealand could safely contain outbreaks (13 per cent). Only 3 per cent of people thought the border should be opened immediately. This high level of concern about the risks associated with reopening the border aligned with government practice at the time and is consistent with the very high levels of support for the government's overall pandemic response and acceptance of restrictions that at any other time might have been considered draconian (Beattie and Priestley 2021). Indeed, only 6.5 per cent of NZES participants disapproved of the government's Covid-19 response, which had successfully reduced the spread of the virus. These views form the backdrop to New Zealanders' other views about immigration at the time of the 2020 election.

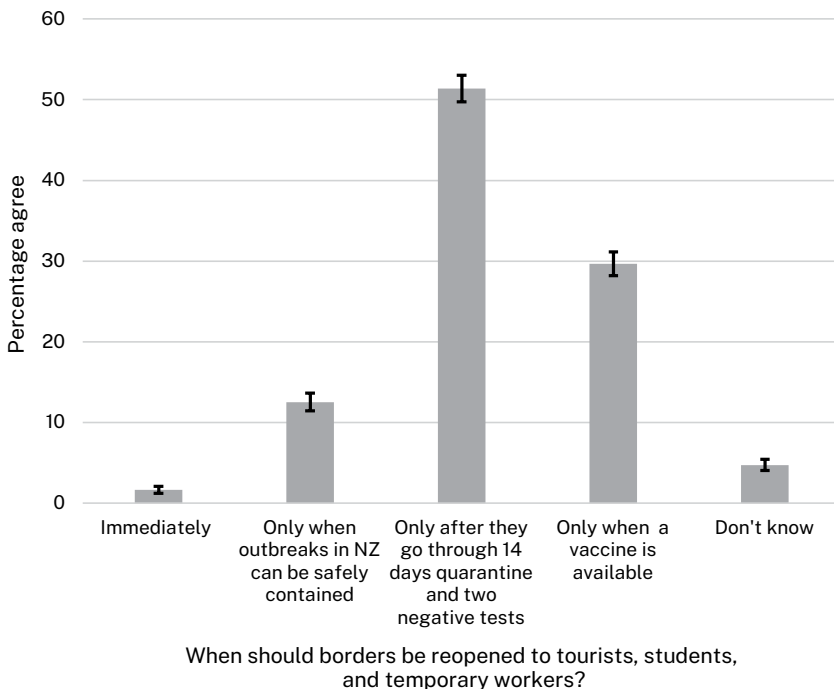


Figure 6.1 Reopening borders to those from countries with Covid-19

Note: The question was: 'When should New Zealand reopen its borders to tourists, students, and temporary workers from countries where there is community transmission of Covid-19?'

Source: Vowles et al. (2022a).

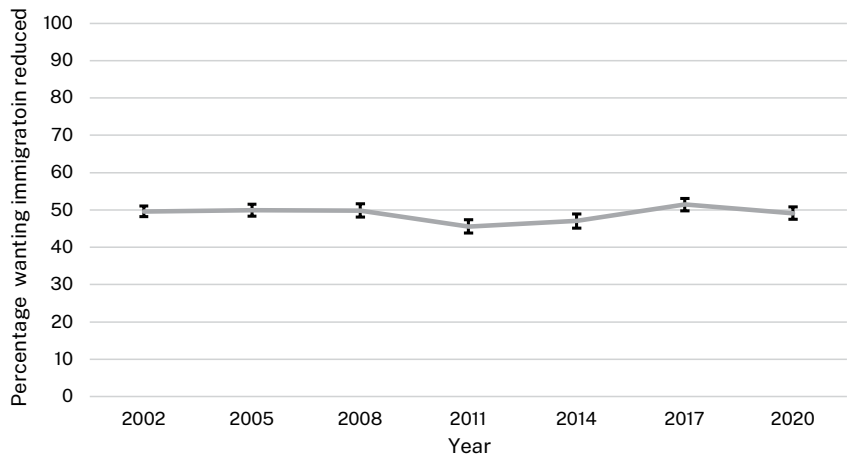


Figure 6.2 Percentage of respondents wanting levels of immigration reduced, 2002–2020

Sources: Vowles et al. (2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e, 2022f).

While participants supported the pandemic-related border closures in late 2020, this did not translate into noticeably more negative views about immigration. Indeed, as Figure 6.2 shows, the share of participants wanting immigration reduced a little or a lot was slightly lower in 2020 (49 per cent) than in 2017 (51 per cent).⁸

While Figure 6.2 gives some support to the stability-of-opinion hypothesis (Hatton 2016; Kustov et al. 2021), if we break down the data, they reveal a more complicated picture. As Figure 6.3 indicates, among those wanting a decrease in immigration there was growth between 2017 (22 per cent) and 2020 (28 per cent) in the percentage wanting it reduced a lot, while fewer people wanted immigration reduced a little in 2020 (21 per cent) than in 2017 (30 per cent). This result is consistent with Pickup et al.’s (2021) finding that continuity, rather than change, prevailed, but that some existing (negative) immigration attitudes were intensified by the pandemic.

8 As the border was essentially closed at the time of the 2020 survey, the question asked participants to think ahead to when it would be open again. In all other respects, the question was the same as in 2017, asking if the number of immigrants allowed into New Zealand should be: increased a lot, increased a little, about the same as now, reduced a little, reduced a lot, or don’t know.

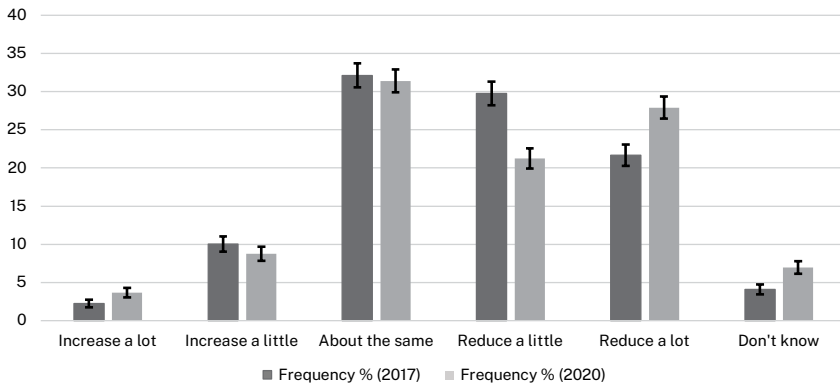


Figure 6.3 What should happen to immigration levels, 2017 and 2020 compared

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

Despite some hardening of opinion around the edges, immigration was clearly not at the forefront of New Zealanders' minds at the 2020 election. When participants were asked to identify the single most important issue to them, we found a notable drop between 2017 (5.2 per cent) and 2020 (1.2 per cent) in the share identifying immigration as their most important issue. This decrease appears to be the result of fewer people in 2020 worrying that immigration had damaging effects.⁹ With most of the population nervous about the border reopening, and with fully one-quarter of participants identifying Covid-related issues as their biggest concern in 2020, it is unsurprising that attention was drawn away from other issues, such as immigration. Other pressing pandemic-related issues and the great reduction in flows across the border rendered immigration simply less important to many people. In turn, while issues such as the effects of Covid-19 on health and the economy dominated voters' minds, underlying views about immigration were not greatly affected and the picture is one of continuity in immigration attitudes.

Which factors influenced participants' attitudes towards immigration in the pandemic context? Continuity is the story here, too, as the factors explaining immigration opinion in pre-pandemic times, both in New Zealand and internationally, continued to be important in 2020. Being more open to immigration is significantly related to being highly educated, being born in North-East Asia, being of Chinese ethnicity, and voting Green (Figure 6.4).

⁹ The 5 per cent of participants who identified immigration as their most important issue in 2017 were significantly more likely to have negative attitudes towards it than those who did not, and were also more likely to think immigration was bad for New Zealand's culture and level of crime.

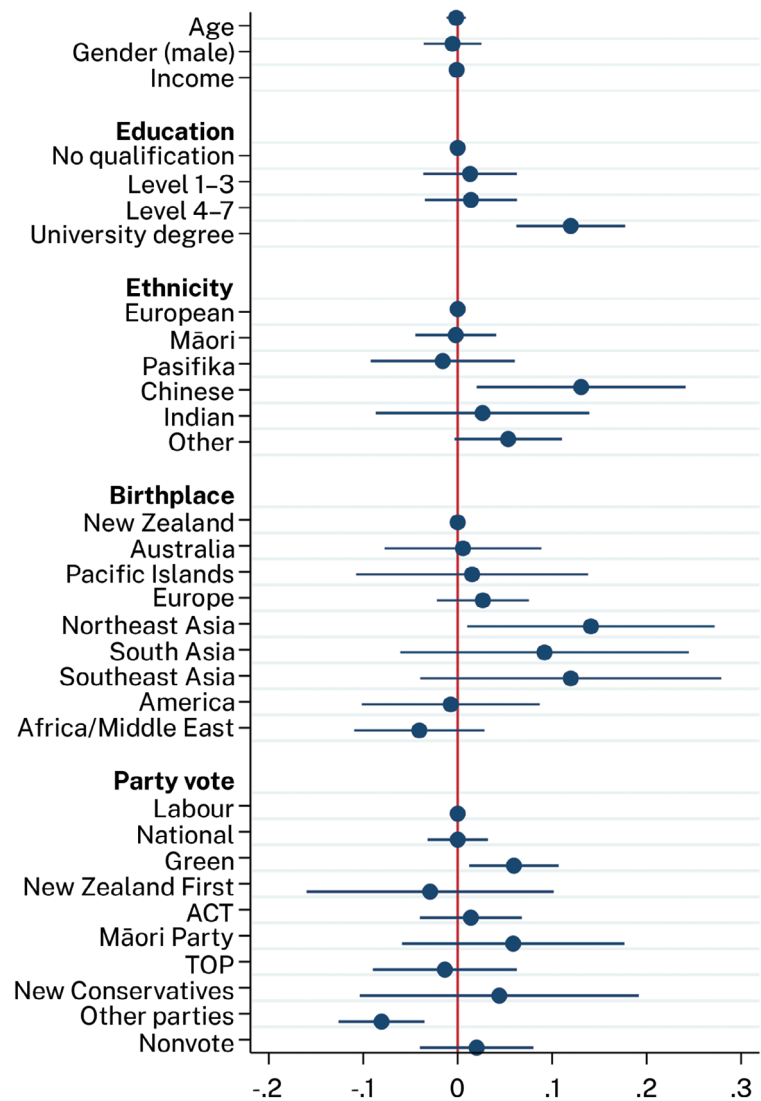


Figure 6.4 Attitudes to levels of immigration by socioeconomic status, ethnicity, country of origin, and party vote

Note: The effects of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, country of birth, and party vote were calculated from four different logistic models, with the last three including socioeconomic controls.

Source: Vowles et al. (2022a).

Conversely, those wanting to see immigration reduced a little or a lot were significantly more likely to be Māori or Pasifika than European or Chinese (Appendix Table 6.1), and New Zealand First voters were significantly more likely than Labour or National voters to want immigration levels reduced. Age and gender were not significantly related to views on levels of immigration (Figure 6.4).

As Figure 6.2 shows, since 2005, about half of New Zealanders have wanted to see immigration reduced. Nonetheless, they have also tended to view immigration as good for the economy; indeed, New Zealanders were even more likely to think immigration was good for the economy nine months into the pandemic (73 per cent) than they were in 2017 (69 per cent) (Figure 6.5). Even among those who wanted immigration reduced a lot, more than 45 per cent considered immigration to be good for the economy. Nor was there much concern that temporary immigrants take jobs from New Zealanders: only 25 per cent considered this to be the case, while 58 per cent disagreed. Even though unemployment was beginning to increase a little as the election approached, tipping over 5 per cent for the first time since 2016 (StatsNZ 2022), the government's success in controlling the pandemic meant that its economic effects were, at that time, less severe than originally feared. The Treasury even noted that the economy had 'bounced back to, or near, pre-COVID-19 levels by July 2020' (New Zealand Treasury 2020). Wage subsidies, income relief packages, and winter energy payment increases (Ministry of Social Development 2020) had all helped to soften the economic impacts of Covid-19, and possibly also to take the sting out of economic dissatisfaction that could otherwise have bolstered demand for populist, anti-immigration policies and parties.

To assess whether the pandemic led to heightened xenophobia and fear of the cultural effects of immigration, as suggested by some of the scholars discussed earlier, we examined whether the share of people thinking that 'New Zealand culture is generally harmed by immigrants' (not asked in the 2008 and 2014 NZESs) had increased. Again, we did not find a statistically significant change between 2017 (22 per cent) and 2020 (19 per cent). The overall trend has, in fact, been in the opposite direction: since 2011, there has been a substantial decrease in the proportion of New Zealanders who believe immigration harms culture (see Figure 6.6). In 2020, 61 per cent of New Zealanders disagreed with the statement that immigrants harm culture.

A TEAM OF FIVE MILLION?

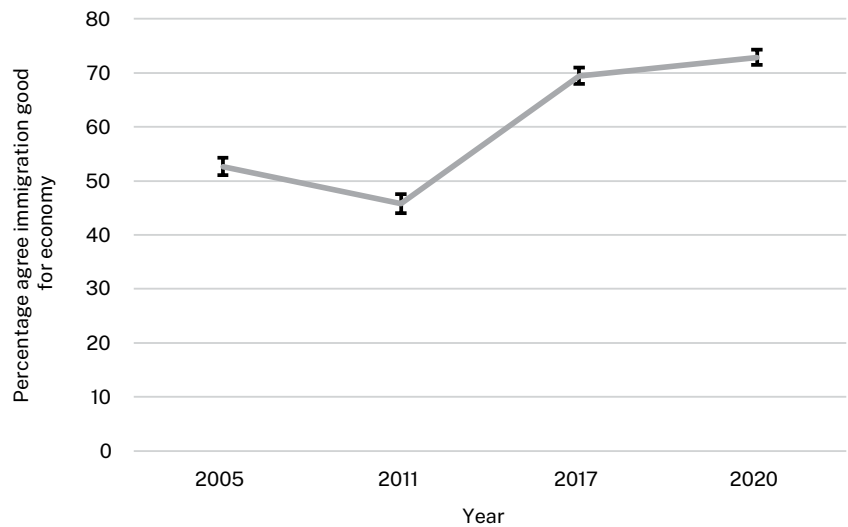


Figure 6.5 Percentage of respondents agreeing that immigrants are good for the economy, 2002–2020

Sources: Vowles et al. (2022a, 2022c, 2022e, 2022f).

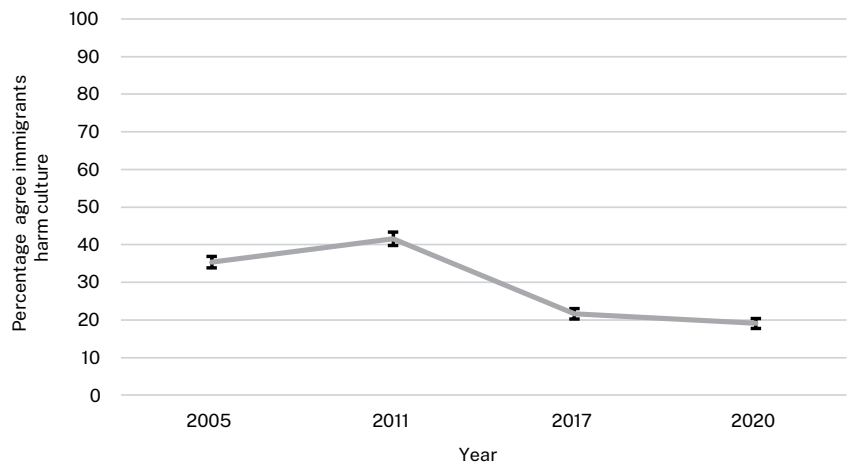


Figure 6.6 Percentage of respondents thinking immigrants harm New Zealand culture, 2002–2020

Sources: Vowles et al. (2022a, 2022c, 2022e, 2022f).

This decline in the proportion of people who believe immigrants harm New Zealand’s culture can be viewed alongside a similar decrease in the proportion of participants agreeing with the statement ‘Minorities should

adapt to the customs and traditions of the majority'. In 2017, 37 per cent of participants agreed, compared with 33 per cent in 2020. This result should be treated with caution, however, because, as Greaves and Vowles (2020) point out, in the New Zealand context, some participants might understand 'minorities' to mean Māori, not immigrant minorities. Nonetheless, an increase in the proportion of New Zealanders who reject the idea that minorities should fully assimilate into the majority group's customs and traditions is consistent with growing support for cultural pluralism in New Zealand between 2017 and 2020.

'Post-pandemic' immigration policy

The shock of the pandemic and sudden border closure did not appear to greatly shift participants' attitudes to immigration or alter the factors shaping these attitudes. However, with the government having stated its intention to rethink immigration policy settings after the pandemic, we asked participants to think about their preferences for future immigration once the border reopened. We were interested, first, in whether New Zealanders supported continued emphasis on temporary rather than permanent migration, as had been characteristic of flows in the previous decade. Views on this were mixed, with many participants expressing uncertainty.¹⁰ Of those who had a view, however, there was a strong preference for permanent (37 per cent) over temporary (23 per cent) migration.

As the government's promise of a 'reset' implied some change to the balance of skills and characteristics it would seek in future immigrants, we next asked participants which kinds of people should be encouraged to come to live in New Zealand when the border reopened (Figure 6.7). Very strong support (89 per cent) was expressed for two categories in particular: 'high-skilled professionals' and 'skilled tradespeople'. There was also strong support (74.5 per cent) for Pasifika seasonal workers. Consistent with the mostly positive attitudes to immigration overall, almost all other migration categories (low-skilled workers, international students, and working holiday visa holders) were also supported by more than 50 per cent of participants.

10 The most common answer to this question was 'not sure' (41 per cent), which suggests many New Zealanders are unaware of the differences between permanent and temporary migration policies or of their consequences for immigrants, their families, and the wider community.

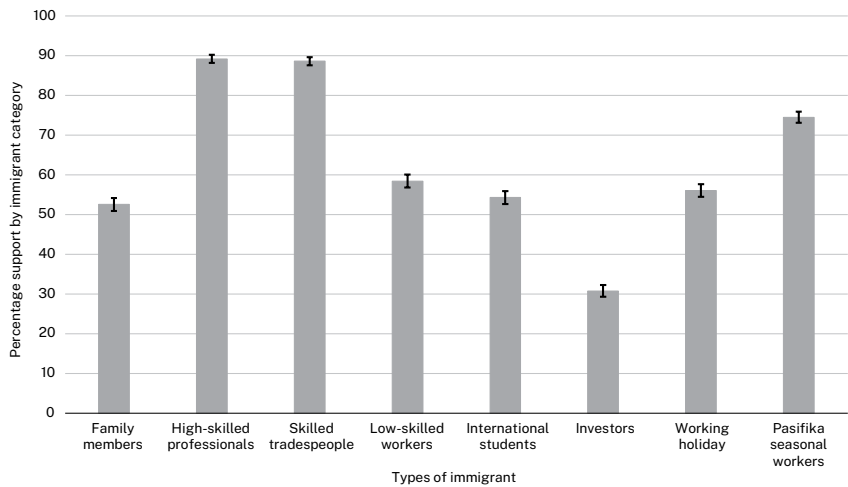


Figure 6.7 Percentage of respondents agreeing that New Zealand should encourage certain kinds of immigrants when the border reopens

Source: Vowles et al. (2022a).

The one immigration category opposed by a clear majority of participants was that of investor immigrants. The comparatively low support (31 per cent) for these migrants is particularly striking given that participants were not asked to make any trade-offs between categories: they could have supported all categories had they wished. It was also the one category for which the Labour Party, alongside National and ACT, had most clearly reaffirmed its support at election time and in subsequent policy initiatives. This clear contradiction between many political parties’ support for high-wealth ‘investor immigrants’ and voters’ opposition to such migrants deserves further exploration, and strongly suggests some elements of the entrenched economic logic of New Zealand’s immigration policy are not supported by voters.

To further explore these findings on future immigration, we investigated how socioeconomic variables and partisanship affected participants’ views.¹¹ The biggest effects here related to partisanship and country of birth. Voting for New Zealand First was significantly related to lower levels of support for all kinds of immigration when compared with those who voted Labour, except for support for investors, where the difference was not statistically significant. National, ACT, and Te Pāti Māori voters were also less likely

¹¹ Detailed models for results in this section are available from the authors on request.

to support family migrants than were Labour voters, and Te Pāti Māori voters were also significantly less likely to support professional and skilled tradespeople. Green voters, by contrast, were significantly more likely to support family migrants, international students, and Pasifika seasonal workers than were Labour voters.

Country of birth emerged as another strong predictor of opinion about different categories of migration. People born in North and East Asia (China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan) were significantly more likely to support the immigration of family members, skilled professionals, international students, and investors than participants born in New Zealand, and significantly less likely to support the immigration of low-skilled workers and Pasifika seasonal workers than the New Zealand-born. Interestingly, those born in the Pacific Islands were no more likely to be supportive of Pasifika seasonal migration than the New Zealand-born, and those born in South or South-East Asia were less likely than the New Zealand-born to be supportive of this migration. While studies reporting attitudes to immigration sometimes elide this dimension of diversity within the sample of participants, these findings show individuals' own immigration background and national origin may affect, in different ways, their attitudes to subsequent immigration to the country.

Social membership and the rights of non-residents

Our final queries concerned New Zealanders' attitudes towards immigrants' access to the property market and welfare benefits. We first asked whether New Zealand should open its housing market to foreign buyers living overseas. An overwhelming majority (87 per cent) of participants opposed this, with only 6.3 per cent in favour.¹² To explore this strong opposition to foreign buyers, we examined a range of factors for their effects on views about who should be able to access homeownership (Figure 6.8). Again, both partisanship and country of origin were significant. Although on average supporters of no party fell to the positive end of the spectrum, National voters were significantly less opposed than Labour voters to opening the housing market to non-residents. Place of birth and ethnicity

¹² As explained earlier, the ban on property purchases also applied to immigrants living in New Zealand on a non-permanent resident visa, but the question, as asked, does not refer to such immigrants.

were also strong predictors of the degree of feeling on this issue, with those born in North-East Asia and those of Chinese ethnicity significantly less opposed (although still, on average, opposed) to allowing foreign buyers to buy houses than the New Zealand-born.

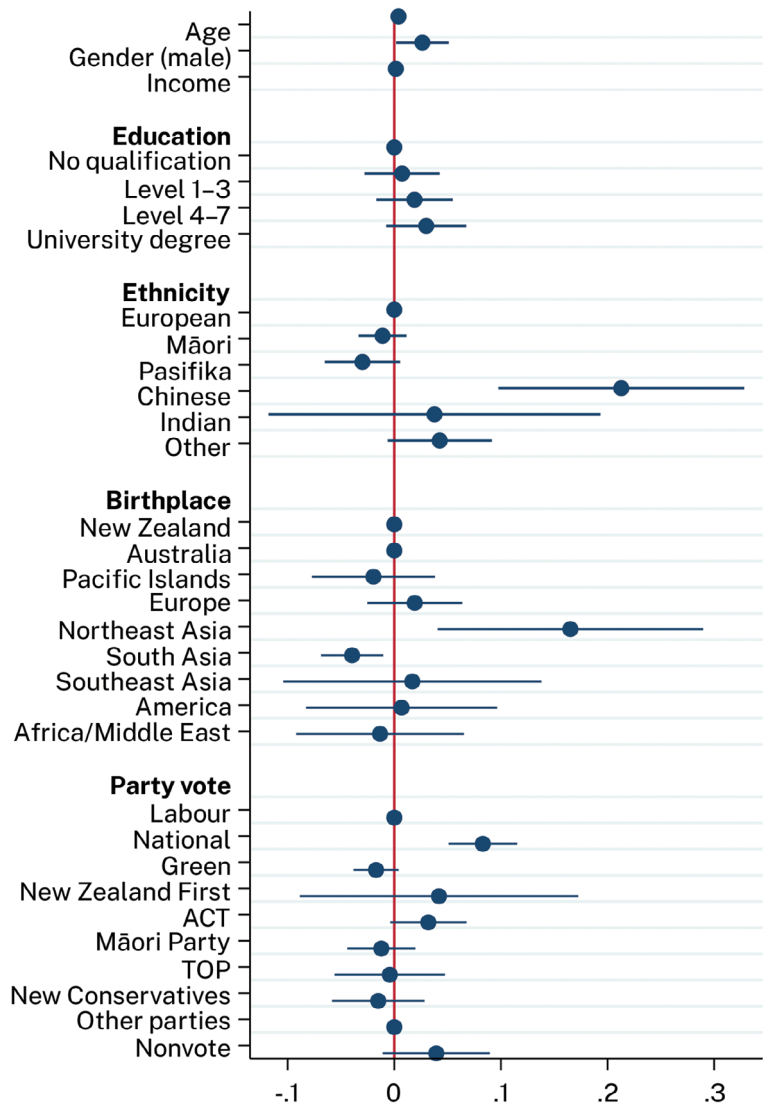


Figure 6.8 Should the housing market be open to foreign buyers living overseas?

Source: Vowles et al. (2022a).

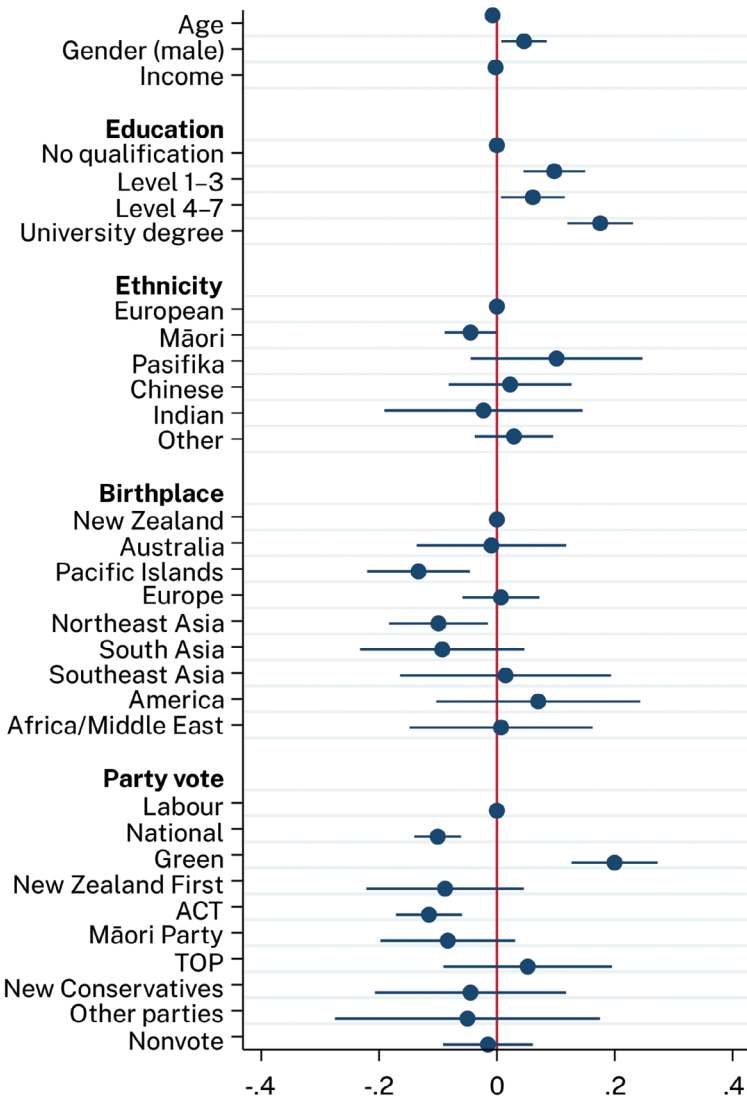


Figure 6.9 Should immigrants have access to welfare?

Source: Vowles et al. (2022a).

We then asked whether immigrants on work visas of two years or more should be eligible to receive welfare benefits (Figure 6.9). More than half of participants replied either ‘Definitely no’ (32 per cent) or ‘Probably no’ (26 per cent), while 17 per cent were unsure and less than one-quarter were in favour (23 per cent). A majority opposed extending welfare support to this group of immigrants, but partisanship also played a significant role:

those voting for National and ACT were significantly less supportive of giving immigrants access to welfare, whereas almost half (49 per cent) of Green voters supported immigrants' access to welfare benefits.¹³

With the exception of Green voters, then, public opinion in this respect was largely in line with existing government policy. For example, while the government extended the Covid-19 wage subsidy scheme to all workers, regardless of residency or visa status, when the country went into lockdown in March 2020, migrants on non-permanent visas were excluded from other key aspects of the welfare regime (Fonseka 2020a). This exclusion of migrants without permanent residence from emergency welfare reinforced the distinction between access to the New Zealand labour market and access to the rights associated with social membership.

Conclusion

Before the pandemic, anti-immigration rhetoric was a recurrent theme among xenophobic populist parties gaining electoral support around the world. McMillan and Gibbons (2020) found New Zealand to be largely a 'populist exception' in this regard in 2017 but cautioned that changes in the immigration and media landscape created potential for immigration to become a more salient and divisive issue. By 2020, the immigration landscape had indeed changed, but in a manner scarcely imaginable three years earlier. As discussed above, the unprecedented levels of immigration of 2017 had by 2020 given way to border closures. With immigration largely stalled, and with an all-consuming media and public focus on the myriad effects of Covid-19, immigration was of low salience at election time. Perhaps unsurprisingly, views about the appropriate levels of immigration remained stable between 2017 and 2020.

Indeed, voters were more positive about the economic and cultural consequences of immigration in 2020 than they had been previously. This could be due in part to media and elite messaging. News coverage during the pandemic highlighted the absence of immigrant labour in a range of sectors and was largely sympathetic to stories of immigrants' experiences.

13 This could indicate acceptance of the current immigration system within which access to permanent status and associated social rights varies substantially based on visa type. Just as likely, however, is that NZES participants, like New Zealanders generally, lack understanding of the complexity in the immigration system and of discrepancies in status and rights available to different groups of immigrants regardless of their contribution to the labour market.

Such stories highlighted the dislocating effect of border closures on the lives of many immigrants, especially long-term workers settled in New Zealand with family who were stranded offshore at the time the border shut but who did not have the permanent resident status required to re-enter the country. In many cases, however, those people most affected by this border exclusion could not vote, and their cause did not mobilise sufficient support for immigration to become a major election issue. Nonetheless, media coverage of migrants' difficulties, combined with extensive coverage of the economic impact of border closures on businesses, potentially reduced the space for anti-immigrant discourse to develop. Also limiting that space was inclusionary elite messaging about immigrants and immigration; this likely played a role in decreasing both the salience of immigration and concerns about its effects. As with the political response to the Christchurch terror attack the year before, the prime minister's language of unity and kindness in the first phase of the pandemic explicitly rejected exclusionary rhetoric. Immigrants on temporary visas were rhetorically included in the Team of Five Million, even if some later came to complain that the policy was exclusionary in practice and the Team of Five Million rhetoric was misleading (Bonnett 2021; The Indian News 2021).

The immigration and broader political contexts of the 2020 election were undoubtedly extraordinary and, as the severity of the pandemic began to wane in 2022 and the border reopened, New Zealand again began to experience high inward migration, as well as high levels of emigration (StatsNZ 2023). Indeed, net migration for the year to March 2023 had risen to 65,400—above the net average for the years 2002–19 (StatsNZ 2023). Breaking with the pre-pandemic trend, though, there also appeared to be a change in emphasis from temporary to permanent migration. In May 2022, the government announced its long-signalled 'rebalancing' of immigration policy (Cooke 2022), which created a streamlined path to residency for migrants whose occupations were on a 'green list', and more than 200,000 people who had been stuck in the country during the pandemic were granted a one-off resident visa.

In late August 2022, however, then new Minister of Immigration, Michael Wood, announced a series of measures to facilitate the entry of temporary migrants to fill labour shortages across a wide range of industries (Wood 2022). This policy was reminiscent of the pre-pandemic reliance on temporary migration to fill labour market gaps and, by June 2023, the media was reporting a return to pre-pandemic migration trends driven by those on student, non-resident work, and tourist visas (MacLeod 2023).

Questions seem likely to continue about where the appropriate balance between permanent and temporary migration lies and the extent to which New Zealand should return to a high-volume economically driven immigration system. Such contestation of immigration settings may grow, especially if associated with ongoing labour market shortages and other negative economic indicators. It could also drive broader public debate about the impacts of immigration on New Zealand society.

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Appendix 6.1

Table A6.1 Logistic regression: Wanting level of immigration to decrease by SES, ethnicity, birthplace, and party vote*

	Model 1a Immigration	Model 1b Immigration	Model 1c Immigration	Model 1d Immigration
Age	0.004 (0.003)	0.007** (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)
Gender (male)	0.095 (0.099)	0.119 (0.100)	0.085 (0.100)	0.077 (0.102)
Income	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Education (ref: no qualification)				
Level 1-3 qualification	-0.248 (0.166)	-0.176 (0.170)	-0.269 (0.168)	-0.226 (0.169)
Level 4-7 qualification	-0.158 (0.173)	-0.095 (0.176)	-0.112 (0.174)	-0.156 (0.176)
University degree	-0.861*** (0.172)	-0.724*** (0.175)	-0.775*** (0.174)	-0.845*** (0.173)
Ethnicity (ref: NZ European)				
Māori		0.603*** (0.130)		
Pasifika		0.846*** (0.295)		
Chinese		-0.012 (0.281)		
Indian		0.281 (0.456)		
Other		-0.293* (0.162)		
Country of birth (ref: New Zealand)				
Australia			-0.154 (0.345)	
Pacific Islands			-0.051 (0.383)	
Europe			-0.460** (0.188)	
North-East Asia			-0.359 (0.348)	

A TEAM OF FIVE MILLION?

	Model 1a Immigration	Model 1b Immigration	Model 1c Immigration	Model 1d Immigration
South Asia			0.417	
			(0.492)	
South-East Asia			-0.414	
			(0.381)	
America			-0.866	
			(0.548)	
Africa/Middle East			-0.402	
			(0.392)	
Party vote (ref: Labour)				
National				0.088
				(0.112)
Green				-0.579***
				(0.164)
New Zealand First				0.796**
				(0.340)
ACT				0.292*
				(0.168)
Māori Party				0.091
				(0.342)
TOP				-0.072
				(0.335)
New Conservatives				-0.346
				(0.442)
Other parties				1.320**
				(0.557)
Nonvote				0.086
				(0.192)
Constant	0.138	-0.192	0.171	0.132
	(0.248)	(0.270)	(0.250)	(0.249)
No.	3,410	3,384	3,344	3,321
Pseudo R²	0.0239	0.0370	0.0296	0.0367

* p < 0.10

** p < 0.05

*** p < 0.01

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; NZES sampling weights applied.

Source: Vowles et al. (2022a).

This text is taken from *A Team of Five Million?: The 2020 'Covid-19' New Zealand General Election*, edited by Jennifer Curtin, Lara Greaves and Jack Vowles, published 2024 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

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