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## **Boycotting the ‘Team of Five Million’**

Josh Van Veen and Luke Oldfield

### **Introduction**

In a self-published book, National MP Chris Penk wrote of a country that was under existential threat, not from a pathogen but from ‘compulsory kindness’ (Penk 2020, 149). Penk believed that lockdown restrictions were well-meaning but ill-conceived and disproportionate to the threat of Covid-19. The success of the Ardern government’s elimination strategy was attributed to luck rather than leadership. Penk was speaking for a faction on the political right by claiming that the suspension of personal and economic freedoms did much greater harm than any virus could. It was a belief that few New Zealanders shared in 2020. As an independent review of the National Party’s campaign later found, MPs ‘neither responded well’ to Covid-19 ‘nor conducted themselves in a way to gain the public’s confidence’, and failed to connect with large parts of society (Vance 2022, 219). Penk’s opposition to the elimination strategy, then, can be understood as existing outside the mainstream politics of the Labour and National parties.

This chapter takes a closer look at the politicians and their parties who were electioneering outside the mainstream. It notes that a ragtag collection of small parties opposing Covid-19 lockdowns, and largely mischaracterised as being on the ‘far right’, were ineffectual in gaining a sufficient level of public

support. At the same time, confused messaging from National Party MPs opened the door for the smaller ACT New Zealand (ACT) to substantially increase its share of the vote.

While it is a truism that elections are fought and won in the ‘centre’, pandemic politics exposed National on a new front: it also found itself in competition with the ideological right. Formed in 1994 to carry forward a neoliberal agenda, ACT, after initial success in electing a handful of MPs, fell on hard times following the 2008 election. One ACT MP was elected in 2011 but only because of a tacit electorate deal with the National Party. But in 2020 a rejuvenated ACT presented the biggest challenge on the right to support for the National Party. Its leader and sole MP, David Seymour, garnered considerable attention for his provocative style, leading some to compare him to populist Winston Peters. Advance NZ, established just two months before election day, was led by disgraced former National MP Jami-Lee Ross and musician turned conspiracy theorist Billy Te Kahika, Jr. Despite a very large following on social media, prompted by anti-vaccine messaging and opposition to lockdowns, Advance NZ captured only 1 per cent of the vote, prompting Te Kahika to adopt the mantle of New Zealand’s Donald Trump and claim the election result was fraudulent. The New Conservative Party, led by Christchurch businessman Leighton Barker, also opposed lockdowns but did not fare much better, though its vote count increased significantly from 6,253 in 2017 to 42,615 at the 2020 election.

In this chapter, we use data from the 2020 NZES to explore the intersection between hostility to the government’s Covid-19 response and support for right-wing parties. To provide further context, we begin the chapter with a brief history of the National Party’s decline and the rise in support for minor parties during 2020. The chapter then analyses the subset of NZES participants who objected to the government’s Covid-19 response. We find that religiosity and right-wing ideological traits are the strongest predictors of whether a person disapproved of the way the Ardern government responded to Covid-19. Having established this relationship between ideology and Covid-19, we then turn our attention to the three right-wing parties in competition with National. First, we explore the demographic correlates between supporting the two Covid-sceptic parties, Advance NZ and the New Conservatives. We then consider whether these parties can appropriately be classified as ‘radical right’ using a comparative framework (Donovan 2020). Finally, we use data from the NZES to investigate the rivalry between ACT and National.

## **'Cindy's kindy': The decline and fall of National<sup>1</sup>**

Throughout the early stages of the pandemic, it was common for both local and international media to cast lockdown measures as a trade-off between public health and economic wellbeing. Signalling an ideological preference for prioritising the economy, the Conservative government in the United Kingdom initially sought to ride out the crisis without introducing comprehensive restrictions on the movement of people (Smith 2021). In the United States, a Republican president and Republican-led state governments were at odds with Democrat-led state governments, which had opted to prioritise a public health response to the crisis (Baccini and Brodeur 2021; Yamey and Gonsalves 2020). As the virus spread across the United States, lockdowns and associated public health measures became partisan issues that led to nationwide protests beginning in April 2020.

In New Zealand, a health-centred response had bipartisan support. There was virtually no opposition to the first lockdown, in March–April 2020, and very little opposition to the second, in August–September 2020, while police reported high levels of compliance across the country. With the encouragement of former prime ministers from both Labour and National, the 'Team of Five Million' heeded the prime minister's call to 'stay home, save lives'. This bipartisan consensus helped ensure that the first nationwide lockdown was a remarkable success. Despite the bipartisan support for the first lockdown, opinion polls recorded a dramatic swing in voting intention from National to Labour. As findings from the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Survey (Sibley et al. 2020) suggest, the success of the first lockdown correlated with a heightened sense of community and national pride while trust and confidence in the government increased significantly.

The government had successfully cultivated a perception among voters of competency during times of crisis, presenting difficulties for the opposition. It was a frustration expressed by former National Party president Michelle Boag when she bemoaned 'Cindy's kindy', thus evoking a sexist trope of female leadership (Ensor 2020). To scrutinise government decision-making in the absence of parliament operating as it usually would, National Party leader Simon Bridges chaired an Epidemic Response Committee

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1 'Cindy's kindy' was a pejorative reference to Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and her leadership during Covid-19 lockdowns.

(ERC). However, balancing support for the government's health-centred response while also criticising the government's preparedness proved to be a difficult task. Bridges himself faced scrutiny for travelling to Wellington to participate in the ERC during the lockdown (RNZ 2020). Moves to replace Bridges as leader were precipitated by his own widely pilloried Facebook post criticising the government for taking a cautious approach to reopening. Bridges's eventual successor, Bay of Plenty MP Todd Muller, would last only 57 days in the role before resigning as leader. Muller was also impacted by pandemic politics, with one of his MPs forced to quit after leaking confidential information about persons with Covid-19. Following Muller's resignation, long-serving National Party MP Judith Collins filled the leadership vacuum, taking the party into the 2020 election.

Leadership issues were not the only problem faced by the country's main opposition party. A lack of cohesive response from its MPs to the threat posed by the pandemic could also have undermined its credibility among voters. In June 2020, National MP Simon O'Connor drew ridicule for a speech he gave to parliament that suggested 'Keep left' road signs were part of a broad sweep of government propaganda that extended from an appeal to kindness by the Ardern government. During the second Covid-19 outbreak in August, O'Connor wrote a now-deleted blog on his electorate Facebook page suggesting that loosened Covid-19 restrictions were preferable to a return to hard lockdown—a position at odds with his party's commitment to an elimination strategy. Deputy party leader Gerry Brownlee also attracted criticism for his comments after the start of the second lockdown, implying that the government had known of an impending outbreak and had been withholding information from the public. Brownlee said on talkback radio that he 'just found it interesting' that the government had, in the preceding weeks, visibly ramped up the nation's preparedness for a second outbreak, but he later walked back his remarks after being branded a conspiracy theorist (Wade 2020).

National was unable to capitalise on the government's failure to prevent a second outbreak and won only 25.6 per cent of the party vote on election night—barely half that of the Labour Party. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this volume, 84 per cent of NZES participants approved of the government's Covid-19 response and only 6 per cent disapproved. When asked how the government's Covid-19 response made them feel, only 10 per cent of participants were 'uneasy', 2.4 per cent were 'angry', 2.3 per cent were 'afraid', and 1.4 per cent were 'disgusted'. These emotions were well outweighed by positive emotions, with 35 per cent saying they felt 'proud'.

Such overwhelming support for the government's health-centred response suggests a miscalculation on the part of some high-profile National MPs who had been sceptical of or hostile to the government's pandemic response.

## Covid-19 and anti-government sentiment

As described in Chapter 1, public opinion polls in 2020 recorded a dramatic swing in voting intention from National to Labour. Alleged mishandling of the public health response and failure to prevent a second outbreak in August 2020 had no discernible effect on support for the Ardern government. Of those New Zealanders who opted out of the Team of Five Million, it seems they did not belong to one ideologically homogeneous group. Instead, opposition to the Covid-19 response can be best explained through an explicit distrust of Prime Minister Ardern.

While the number of NZES participants who disapproved of the Covid-19 response was indeed small, they are still an important part of the story. Several political parties gave expression to those who were sceptical or downright hostile to public health measures. At times, this even included the centre-right National Party. But it was a broad spectrum of minor parties ranging from the libertarian ACT to the Christian fundamentalist ONE Party that made the most explicit appeal to boycott the Team of Five Million.

Chapter 2 discussed the impact of Covid-19 on public opinion and electoral outcomes. A key finding of that chapter was the relationship between trust in Jacinda Ardern, approval of the Covid-19 response, and change in the Labour Party vote between 2017 and 2020. In contrast to Chapter 2's analysis, which included 'prior bias' as a control, we have used a simple binary logistic regression to investigate the relationship between certain social structural variables and disapproval of the pandemic response. We have done this to construct a demographic profile. We report our findings in terms of odds ratios (see the first column of Appendix Table A8.2).<sup>2</sup> With an odds ratio of 0.569, our baseline analysis finds that women were a little more than half as likely to disapprove of the government's Covid-19 response as men—that is, their odds of disapproving were 0.569 to one. Disapproval also correlated highly with farming and self-employment on

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2 An odds ratio of one would mean there is no difference in the effect on the outcome variable of the value or values or category or categories compared. An odds ratio of less than one designates a negative relationship with the outcome variable, and more than one, a positive relationship.

a household basis (odds ratios of 2.8 to 1 and 1.8 to 1, respectively). In an alternative exploratory model, we found no significant relationship between disapproval and education. In our baseline model, appraisal of household finances was another significant predictor. Those who reported their household finances had worsened over the past year were 2.4 times more likely to disapprove of the Covid-19 response than those who reported they were doing better. However, the model explains only 9.2 per cent of the variance between disapproval and approval. It is important to also consider the role of ideology.

There is an emerging literature on ideological responses to Covid-19. Recent studies in other jurisdictions have established a relationship between right-wing ideology and scepticism of Covid-19 (Calvillo et al. 2020; Choma et al. 2021; Latkin et al. 2021; Murphy et al. 2021). These studies make use of two attitudinal dimensions to measure ideology: right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO). While RWA measures deference to authority and tradition, SDO is used to measure support for group-based hierarchies. It is generally accepted that those who score highly for RWA and SDO are more sensitive than the general population to perceived threats against society. However, research by Onraet et al. (2013) found that right-wing individuals are less sensitive to threats of a personal nature such as mental distress. Clarke et al. (2021) have theorised that this dual nature could explain why RWA and SDO appear to predict scepticism of Covid-19 and opposition to public health restrictions. In other words, right-wing individuals may perceive loss of personal freedom as a greater threat to society than the virus.

In broader terms, authoritarianism can be understood as ‘a cluster of values prioritising collective security for the group at the expense of liberal autonomy for the individual’ (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 9). There has been extensive research on authoritarianism in New Zealand focussed on understanding the relationship between ideology and prejudice against minorities (Brune et al. 2016; Duckitt and Sibley 2016; Satherley and Sibley 2018; Sibley et al. 2019). The effects of authoritarianism on voting behaviour have also been subject to investigation (Greaves and Vowles 2020, 85–87). The NZES uses a scale to estimate authoritarian attitudes based on three questions about leadership, interpersonal trust, and discipline. Further, the 2020 NZES also included a set of questions asking the respondent which of two qualities are more important in children. It has been established

that people who value qualities such as obedience and respect for elders are predisposed to authoritarianism (Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005).

The claim that authoritarianism could predict opposition to public health restrictions intended to prevent mass death sits uncomfortably with Norris and Inglehart's (2019) conceptualisation of authoritarianism. Ironically, the Covid-19 pandemic has seen right-wing authoritarians champion negative freedom and personal choice over state control. Vowles (2022) suggests the answer to this paradox could lie in the emphasis placed on submission rather than dominance in conventional measures of authoritarianism. It is therefore instructive to consider the role specific traits may play. Clarke et al. (2021) found that opposition and reactance to government restrictions in Australia were associated with traditionalism. However, a preference for in-group dominance appeared to be a stronger predictor. While a direct comparison might not be possible, the relationship is worth exploring further with the data available to us in the 2020 NZES.

To rule out the effect of authoritarianism as conventionally measured in the NZES, we included a three-item authoritarian time-series scale in our regression model that has been used in the NZES from its beginning.<sup>3</sup> We found the expected relationship between placement on the NZES authoritarian scale and disapproval of the government's Covid-19 response when controlling for social structural variables. This added a further 2 per cent to the explanation of the variance between approval and disapproval. The person most disposed to authoritarianism was just over eight times more likely to oppose the government's response than someone least disposed. We also tested the Child-Rearing Values Scale (Feldman and Stenner 1997; Vowles 2022). Substituting this variable for the NZES authoritarian scale, we found that authoritarian disposition also had a significant but weaker effect, with an odds ratio of 2.7 between its authoritarian and non-authoritarian extremes, adding much less to the variance explained.

What about specific traits? To explore the possible relationship between traditionalism, in-group dominance, and Covid-19, we used a question on whether minorities 'should adapt to the customs and traditions of the majority' to operationalise these sentiments. Those who strongly agreed

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3 The questions are in a five-point agree/disagree format. They are: 'Most people would try to take advantage of others if they had the chance'; 'A few strong leaders could make this country better than all the laws and talk'; and 'What young people need most is strict discipline from their parents'. The scale is based on addition of these responses, transformed to run between zero and one.

with the statement were a little less than twice as likely to disapprove of the Covid-19 response than those who strongly disagreed but this fell short of statistical significance and added almost nothing to the variance explained. Authoritarian attitudes add something to the explanation of disapproving of the government's Covid-19 policies, but a combination of social structural variables and concern about the economy explain much more. A large part of this effect was age: people aged 61 and above were about one-third less likely to disapprove than those in the 18–31 age group. It was those aged 41–60 who were the most likely to disapprove.

Authoritarianism could also manifest in attitudes to the Treaty of Waitangi and the constitutional status of Māori. This reflects the fact that New Zealand is a colonial-settler society, in which Pākehā are the ethnic majority. It follows that those who have a strong psychological need for conformity feel threatened by diversity and are therefore much less inclined to support notions of co-governance. To measure anti-Māori sentiment, we constructed a scale from three questions in the NZES. The first two of these asked participants the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: 'Reference to the Treaty of Waitangi should be removed from law' and 'Māori should have more say in all government decisions'. The third question asked: 'Do you think the Treaty settlement process has gone too far, far enough, or not far enough?' Those who agreed with the first statement, disagreed with the second statement, and believed that the Treaty settlement process had gone 'too far' represented 5.2 per cent of the sample. Including this new variable in our model, we found a strong relationship between scoring high for anti-Māori sentiment and disapproval of the government's Covid-19 response. Those most opposed to policies to advance the interests of Māori were just over seven times more likely to disapprove of the government's Covid-19 response. Including this variable added another 2 per cent to the explanatory power of the model—about the same effect as that of authoritarianism.

However, consistent with the findings in Chapter 2, we found that distrust of Jacinda Ardern had the most explanatory power when it came to disapproval of the government's Covid-19 response. Those with the lowest degree of trust in Ardern were about 95 times more likely to disapprove than those with the highest trust.<sup>4</sup> Including this variable in our model increased its explanatory power by 24 per cent, to 38 per cent. In other words, this combination

4 'How well do you feel the following descriptions apply to Jacinda Ardern: A competent leader; a trustworthy leader?' Five-point scales.



of social structure, ideology, and leadership accounts for more than one-third of the variance. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was voters' perception of Ardern herself that had the greatest impact on whether someone chose to boycott the Team of Five Million. In the end, a small minority reacted negatively to Ardern's appeal for kindness and solidarity.

## Party support: Sceptics and opportunists?

While these voters represent a theoretically significant bloc, the fragmentation of party support undermined any electoral strength this bloc might have had. About 46 per cent of those who disapproved of the government's Covid-19 response gave their party vote to National, while 16 per cent voted for ACT, and a further 11 per cent voted for minor parties of the right ( $n = 208$ ).<sup>5</sup> The last category included Advance NZ and the New Conservatives but also the Christian fundamentalist ONE Party, Vision New Zealand, and the Outdoors Party. These five 'Covid-sceptical' parties received a combined 86,662 votes (about 3 per cent of the total). Thus, National lost the election, but won the anti-lockdown vote and, in so doing, could have suppressed a more extreme reaction from the authoritarian right.

To investigate the relationship between party support and Covid-19 further, we analysed support for Advance NZ and the New Conservatives. The two parties received 1.5 per cent and 1 per cent of the vote, respectively, making them the most significant of the Covid-sceptical parties. However, given the small number of Advance NZ and New Conservative voters in our sample, it is inappropriate to make generalisations. To overcome the small sample size, we measured party support in terms of 'likeability' rather than party vote, which was defined as a score of six or more on a zero–10 scale. On this measure, about 3 per cent ( $n = 109$ ) of NZES participants were favourable to Advance NZ and 4.8 per cent ( $n = 178$ ) to the New Conservatives. Likeability is a reasonable indication of potential support in the electorate (Vowles et al. 2017). Using a similar social structural model to that discussed in the previous section, we investigated the demographic and ideological correlates of party support.

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5 Seventeen per cent did not vote, with most of the remainder voting Labour, Green, and New Zealand First.

Appendix Table A8.3 shows that religiosity, measured by church attendance, was the most significant factor in liking or disliking the New Conservatives. Those attending church at least once a month were about six times more likely to support the New Conservatives. When it came to Advance NZ, religiosity had a much smaller effect, with regular churchgoers only twice as likely to indicate support. There was no relationship between ethnicity and support for the New Conservatives; however, Māori were just over twice as likely to support Advance NZ as those in the residual European/other category of ethnicity. The almost equal strength of religion and ethnicity in predicting support for Advance NZ is consistent with the profile of co-leader Te Kahika and his belief in Christian End Times theology (Galbraith 2020).

We found a positive relationship between liking Advance NZ or the New Conservatives and living in a household in which at least one person was employed in a manual or service occupation; in the case of Advance NZ, it was not statistically significant, but for the New Conservatives, it met that test at the 90 per cent level (in nine of 10 possible samples). In the case of the New Conservatives, such a person was 1.5 times more likely than someone living in a non-working-class household to indicate support. There is a vast literature on the ‘proletarianisation’ of the radical right in Europe (Oesch 2008; Bornschier and Kriesi 2012). Our finding could be interpreted as evidence that a segment of the New Zealand working-class electorate was galvanised by right-wing opposition to the Ardern government during 2020. However, while class could have been a factor, the weight of evidence suggests that anti-government sentiment with respect to Covid-19 is better explained by personal values or psychological traits than by economic inequality.

What about ideology? Adding the minorities variable to our model, we found that this had a positive effect on support for the New Conservatives significant at the 90 per cent level and a non-significant negative effect for liking Advance NZ. As for anti-Māori sentiment, we found the same non-significant effects on liking or not liking each party, although removing the minorities must adapt variable from the model generated a significant effect for the New Conservatives. This could reflect different voter bases. The New Conservatives appealed to a segment of the Pākehā electorate with its ‘one law for all’ stance. Advance NZ, as previously mentioned, received greater support from Māori than from Pākehā, yet both parties tapped into the same wellspring of support among those who opposed lockdowns and were inclined to believe conspiracy theories about the origin of Covid-19.

This intersection between anti-government sentiment and conspiracism was on full display at public demonstrations held around New Zealand in the lead-up to election day (Palmer 2020). These gatherings were in breach of social distancing rules and attracted mainstream media coverage for their defiance.

At one such gathering on 29 August, New Conservative Party deputy leader Elliot Ikilei and Advance NZ co-leader Jami-Lee Ross addressed a crowd of several hundred in Auckland's Aotea Square. Paranoia about the UN Sustainable Development Goals program, known as 'Agenda 2030', was a recurring theme among protestors (1News 2020). Te Kahika himself believed the New Zealand Government was complicit in a UN 'plandemic' (Peters 2020). According to Te Kahika, global elites manufactured the virus as a bioweapon for population control. It is unclear how prevalent such beliefs are in New Zealand; however, research from the United States has found that religiosity and belief in the supernatural are the most powerful predictors of conspiracism (Oliver and Wood 2014, 2018). This suggests an underlying predisposition to believe in hidden forces. Oliver and Wood (2018) found that such cognitive tendencies can lead to magical thinking whereby a person attributes an event to unobservable phenomena despite evidence to the contrary. Te Kahika and his followers exemplified magical thinking in New Zealand during 2020.

The relationship between Covid scepticism and conspiracy theories originating in 'alt-right' cyberspace led New Zealand commentators to portray Advance NZ and, to a lesser extent, the New Conservatives as being analogous to the radical right of North America. According to Ngata (2020), Māori were particularly susceptible to the Trump-inspired 'Q-Anon' narrative of elite corruption and state illegitimacy. Our findings suggest that this apparent convergence between Māori nationalism and symbols associated with white supremacy can be understood in the context of religious fundamentalism. But where do Advance NZ and the New Conservatives fit within a comparative framework? Donovan (2020) has proposed five criteria for categorising a party as 'radical right': 1) intersection of populist style and antipathy towards immigration; 2) cultural authoritarianism; 3) political authoritarianism; 4) supporters in the electorate identify as right-wing; and 5) the electorate views the party as right-wing (Donovan 2020, 60). We applied these criteria to our models on liking or not liking Advance NZ and the New Conservatives.

Attitudes to immigration are measured by a range of questions in the NZES (for further discussion, see Chapter 6, this volume). For this study, we have used a question about the number of immigrants who should be allowed into New Zealand when the border reopened. Those who said the number should be reduced ‘a lot’ or ‘a little’ are considered to have an antipathy to immigration. For cultural authoritarianism, two questions are applied, the first of which asks how important the country’s customs and traditions are to one’s identity as ‘a true New Zealander’. As discussed by Barker and Vowles (2020), it is difficult to identify a homogeneous nation in the New Zealand context given the legacy of biculturalism. Nevertheless, the question about traditionalism is useful for exploratory purposes. A second question measuring cultural authoritarianism comes from the Child-Rearing Values Scale. The trait of ‘obedience’ has been established as having particular significance to cultural authoritarians (Hetherington et al. 2009). Again, following Donovan (2020), we used the question about strong leadership and rule-bending to operationalise political authoritarianism. Finally, we analysed where Advance NZ and New Conservatives supporters placed themselves on the left–right scale compared with where the electorate located those parties.

Appendix Table A8.4 replicates Donovan’s (2020) model. This included a variable measuring perceptions of the country’s economic performance (which was non-significant). The control variables were age, education, and gender. We found a relationship between Advance NZ and antipathy to immigration; however, there was no relationship between Advance NZ and three of the other four criteria. The model was more effective at predicting support for the New Conservatives, with ‘obedience’ and ideological self-placement both strong predictors. Yet, despite evidence of cultural authoritarianism, the model found a negative relationship between preference for rule-bending leaders and support for the New Conservatives. When it came to the ideological placement of the parties, NZES participants gave Advance NZ a mean score of 9.6 and the New Conservatives a mean score of 9.4 on the left–right scale (0–10), placing both on the extreme right. Taken together, these findings suggest that, while voters perceive Advance NZ and the New Conservatives as being to the right of mainstream parties, they do not represent the exclusionary populism of authoritarians in Europe and North America. Indeed, cultural and institutional differences often make such analogies fraught. While the rise of a homegrown radical right should not be dismissed, it is likely to manifest in a way that defies international stereotyping (see also Oldfield and Van Veen 2023).

## A new ACT?

Despite their emotional resonance with Covid-sceptics, Advance NZ and the New Conservatives were rejected even by those outside the Team of Five Million. In fact, most gravitated to the mainstream centre-right. While a plurality who opposed the government's pandemic response gave their support to National, Her Majesty's loyal opposition had a strong rival in ACT. Both parties aggressively campaigned against what they perceived as bureaucratic incompetence and political mismanagement of the crisis; however, neither proposed to abandon the elimination strategy. They promised to accelerate technological improvements that would reduce the need for lockdowns and allow for international travel. National would establish a border protection agency to provide 'world-class defence' against the virus (Moir 2020). ACT leader David Seymour told party faithful in a major speech on 11 July of his vision for 'smart borders that people and money can come through, but not COVID-19' (Robson 2020). Such policies were consistent with the belief that New Zealand's geographical isolation made it a 'Shangri-la' (Cheng 2021). From Seymour's perspective, only the government stood in the way of this Covid-free, high-tech utopia.

An explanation for National's and ACT's approaches to Covid-19 lies in the 'valence' or performance model of electoral choice (Stokes 1963; Clarke et al. 2011). According to Whiteley et al. (2013, 1–2), 'voters make choices primarily on the basis of rival parties' perceived abilities to deliver policy outcomes on salient issues involving broad consensus about what governments should do'. In 2020, the overwhelming majority of New Zealanders supported the Ardern government's elimination strategy and regarded the Level 4 nationwide lockdown as a success. While some elites argued for a 'herd immunity' approach on utilitarian grounds, claiming the economic and social costs of lockdown outweighed the infection fatality rate (Chaudhuri 2020; Hooton 2020), this was rejected by National. In August, during a second outbreak of Covid-19, opposition leader Judith Collins disagreed with the suggestion that New Zealanders should 'learn to live with the virus' (Small 2020). Seymour, while sceptical about the efficacy of lockdowns, distanced ACT from the herd immunity approach and argued for New Zealand to follow the example of Taiwan, which relied on extensive contact tracing (McCulloch 2020). Thus, the mainstream centre-right attempted to present itself as more agile and sophisticated than Labour when it came to pandemic politics.

About one-quarter of NZES participants nominated Covid-19 as the most important issue for them in 2020. Of these, 80 per cent believed that Labour was the best party to deal with Covid-19 issues. These numbers reinforce the view that National made a strategic blunder in emphasising the minor differences between itself and Labour on Covid-19. National and ACT may have won the anti-lockdown vote, but the opposition misjudged the electorate. Collins and her strategists appeared to be suffering from a false consensus effect (Ross et al. 1977) in believing that anti-government sentiment was popular. For National, the result was devastating. ACT, however, had good reason to celebrate on election night: it was arguably the most successful of the minor parties. With 7.6 per cent of the vote, ACT went from having a sole MP to a caucus of 10, reaching parity with the Greens. What explains this remarkable success? About 60 per cent of ACT voters in our sample reported voting for National in 2017.

We analysed the demographic correlates of ACT support and a range of other variables to explore why someone might have voted for ACT. Seymour remarked in his speech at the triennial post-election conference that market research leading into the election had suggested the party could appeal to two archetypal voters: a male business owner named 'Ken' and a middle-aged professional woman named 'Angela'. However, the gender gap in ACT support was the largest of any mainstream party in our sample, with males representing 64 per cent of ACT voters. The analysis in the first two columns of Appendix Table A8.5 finds that controlling for other social structural variables, a man was about twice as likely as a woman to vote for ACT (a female–male odds ratio of 0.577). All ethnic groups other than those in the residual European/other category were significantly less likely to vote ACT. However, living in a household in which at least one person was self-employed or owned a business did not correlate with voting for ACT. Nor was there any relationship between occupation and voting ACT. From the available data in the NZES, the existence of 'Ken' is somewhat plausible but that of 'Angela' is less so. ACT support was strongest in rural areas and weakest in the suburbs of large cities. ACT voters were three times more likely to have a very high income than non-ACT voters, but no greater number of assets, and were unlikely to be a union member or live in a household with one.

What about the rivalry for the centre-right vote between ACT and National? In Columns 3 and 4 of Appendix Table A8.5, we compared the two voter bases. ACT voters were twice as likely to be men and more likely than National voters to live at a rural address. National voters had a higher

number of assets than ACT voters. Adding the five variables from Donovan (2020), those who preferred the trait of obedience in children were more likely to vote for National, while those who self-identified as right-wing were more likely to vote for ACT.

## Conclusion

In 2020, right-wing opposition to the Ardern government was characterised by Covid-scepticism and hostility to public health measures. While the prime minister succeeded in uniting most New Zealanders against Covid-19, a significant minority reacted negatively to her appeal for kindness and solidarity during the pandemic. Those voters found representation in both the mainstream centre-right National Party and a host of right-wing parties. Most of these parties were electorally inconsequential, fulminating around the edges of the 2020 campaign, and falling well short of either the 5 per cent party vote or one electorate seat threshold. ACT was the exception, increasing its caucus from one MP to 10 after winning a historic 7.6 per cent of the party vote.

According to the 2020 NZES, most of ACT's support in the 2020 election came from voters who abandoned National under the leadership of Judith Collins. Adding the NZES authoritarianism scale to an alternative version of the ACT versus National model (without the Donovan variables) indicates that ACT voters were somewhat less authoritarian than National voters. While the trend of opinion polling following the 2020 election suggested ACT was on course to maintain its share of the vote in 2023 (Malpass 2022), the party was struggling to broaden its appeal among women, Māori, and urban voters. Yet these three groups remained well represented in the ACT caucus both before and after the 2023 election. Indeed, the party has performed well with Seymour's archetypal male voter 'Ken', but less so with 'Angela'. The relative success of ACT also prompted questions about whether Seymour has displaced New Zealand First leader Winston Peters as the nation's pre-eminent populist (for a more thorough discussion of this topic, see Oldfield and Van Veen 2023). While it could be true in the performative sense, it was less evident in responses to the NZES. Only 12 per cent of those who reported voting for New Zealand First in 2017 said they voted for ACT in 2020.

None of the Covid-sceptic parties was successful in gaining parliamentary representation; however, many of the individuals aligned with parties such as Advance NZ and the New Conservatives have since coalesced around the anti-vaccine movement. In February 2022, during the peak of the Omicron outbreak, several thousand protestors occupied the grounds of Parliament House and Molesworth Street in central Wellington to demand the government revoke vaccine mandates. While many of the participants disavowed violence, the occupation was marred by extreme rhetoric and violent confrontations with police. The Wellington protests have led some commentators to speculate that the post-2020 electoral landscape is fertile ground for the 'far right' (Manhire 2022). However, our findings suggest a lack of ideological conformity among those who voted for right-wing parties in 2020. New Conservative Party supporters, for example, were anti-Treaty and intolerant of minority differences but there was no relationship between supporting the New Conservatives and hostility to immigration. Advance NZ supporters, on the other hand, were no more authoritarian than any other set of voters or supporters. Indeed, neither party fits the typology of a radical right populist movement. While there was some evidence of a class dimension, leaving open the possibility for a right-wing populist leader to mobilise those 'left behind' in future, opposition to the Ardern government's Covid-19 response was better explained by personal values or psychological traits than by economic inequality and traditional ideology. In other words, while the voters supporting these fringe parties were ideologically amorphous, the parties representing them were equally broad. These divergent interests make the consolidation of support behind a single party or coalition of parties unlikely.

While this subgroup of voters was indeed diverse, an overall profile did emerge. Religiosity was a significant factor, as were certain aspects of right-wing authoritarianism. The latter were teased out by comparing support for the government's Covid-19 response with attitudes to the assimilation of minorities or whether the Treaty of Waitangi should feature in government legislation. However, one factor stood out as the most likely predictor in the NZES of participant disapproval of the Covid-19 response and that was a specific dislike of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. In the end, perhaps, disapproval of the government's handling of the pandemic, or an outright rejection of the health-oriented response, was evident among a small minority, who, much like Chris Penk, were reacting negatively to Ardern's appeal for kindness and solidarity.



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## Appendix 8.1

**Table A8.1 Disapproval of Covid-19 response by social structure, authoritarianism, cultural conservatism, and trust in Jacinda Ardern: Coefficients and robust standard errors**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Female (male)	−0.564** (0.219)	−0.540** (0.219)	−0.523** (0.222)	−0.501** (0.229)	−0.483** (0.238)	−0.256 (0.245)
Age 31–41	−0.164 (0.372)	−0.185 (0.373)	−0.199 (0.378)	−0.170 (0.368)	−0.240 (0.369)	−0.194 (0.368)
Age 41–51	0.397 (0.317)	0.342 (0.323)	0.314 (0.321)	0.289 (0.312)	0.171 (0.315)	0.665* (0.370)

8. BOYCOTTING THE 'TEAM OF FIVE MILLION'

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Age 51–61	0.407 (0.315)	0.355 (0.318)	0.322 (0.315)	0.322 (0.330)	0.244 (0.362)	0.368 (0.407)
Age 61–71	-1.033*** (0.345)	-1.074*** (0.355)	-1.115*** (0.352)	-1.167*** (0.360)	-1.296*** (0.362)	-0.881** (0.396)
Age 71+	-1.165*** (0.376)	-1.277*** (0.384)	-1.331*** (0.393)	-1.394*** (0.376)	-1.581*** (0.373)	-1.254*** (0.402)
Asian	-0.671 (0.412)	-0.858** (0.422)	-0.785* (0.422)	-0.854** (0.423)	-0.737* (0.435)	-0.439 (0.432)
Pasifika	0.916* (0.469)	0.628 (0.494)	0.752 (0.481)	0.635 (0.487)	1.119** (0.494)	1.565*** (0.607)
Māori	-0.267 (0.280)	-0.441 (0.290)	-0.307 (0.289)	-0.413 (0.291)	0.091 (0.335)	-0.063 (0.340)
Employer/self-employed	0.607* (0.316)	0.670** (0.320)	0.601* (0.310)	0.687** (0.328)	0.679* (0.364)	-0.046 (0.392)
Farming	1.045*** (0.344)	0.918*** (0.350)	0.942*** (0.333)	0.915** (0.365)	0.842** (0.422)	0.529 (0.368)
Nonmanual	0.059 (0.243)	-0.052 (0.244)	0.041 (0.244)	-0.058 (0.244)	-0.086 (0.243)	-0.216 (0.285)
Household economy same	0.200 (0.397)	0.201 (0.396)	0.168 (0.393)	0.224 (0.405)	0.270 (0.417)	0.080 (0.427)
Household economy worse	0.877** (0.386)	0.752* (0.386)	0.820** (0.387)	0.763* (0.394)	0.759* (0.403)	0.438 (0.434)
Authoritarianism		2.112*** (0.493)		1.870*** (0.532)	1.548*** (0.588)	0.895 (0.629)
CSV-authoritarian			1.007** (0.428)			
Minorities adapt				0.626 (0.446)	0.175 (0.425)	0.169 (0.438)
Anti-Māori					1.977*** (0.765)	0.850 (0.601)
Trust in Ardern						-4.552*** (0.349)
Constant	-3.097*** (0.384)	-4.138*** (0.468)	-3.438*** (0.419)	-4.292*** (0.489)	-5.029*** (0.601)	-1.492** (0.646)
Observations	3,650	3,650	3,650	3,650	3,650	3,582

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
r <sup>2</sup> _p	0.0915	0.114	0.0984	0.118	0.141	0.377
ll	-728.9	-710.9	-723.4	-707.6	-689.5	-494.5

\*\*\* p < 0.01

\*\* p < 0.05

\* p < 0.1

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

**Table A8.2 Disapproval of Covid-19 response by social structure, authoritarianism, cultural conservatism, and trust in Jacinda Ardern: Odds ratios and adjusted robust standard errors**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Female (male)	0.569** (0.125)	0.583** (0.128)	0.592** (0.131)	0.606** (0.139)	0.617** (0.147)	0.774 (0.190)
Age 31–41	0.849 (0.316)	0.831 (0.310)	0.819 (0.309)	0.843 (0.311)	0.787 (0.290)	0.824 (0.303)
Age 41–51	1.488 (0.471)	1.408 (0.454)	1.369 (0.439)	1.335 (0.417)	1.186 (0.374)	1.945* (0.719)
Age 51–61	1.503 (0.473)	1.427 (0.454)	1.380 (0.435)	1.380 (0.456)	1.276 (0.461)	1.445 (0.587)
Age 61–71	0.356*** (0.123)	0.342*** (0.121)	0.328*** (0.116)	0.311*** (0.112)	0.274*** (0.0991)	0.414** (0.164)
Age 71+	0.312*** (0.117)	0.279*** (0.107)	0.264*** (0.104)	0.248*** (0.0933)	0.206*** (0.0768)	0.285*** (0.115)
Asian	0.511 (0.211)	0.424** (0.179)	0.456* (0.192)	0.426** (0.180)	0.479* (0.208)	0.644 (0.278)
Pasifika	2.500* (1.172)	1.874 (0.926)	2.121 (1.020)	1.888 (0.919)	3.060** (1.511)	4.785*** (2.905)
Māori	0.765 (0.214)	0.643 (0.187)	0.736 (0.213)	0.662 (0.192)	1.095 (0.367)	0.939 (0.319)
Employer/self-employed	1.835* (0.580)	1.954** (0.625)	1.823* (0.565)	1.987** (0.652)	1.973* (0.718)	0.955 (0.374)
Farming	2.843*** (0.979)	2.504*** (0.876)	2.565*** (0.854)	2.496** (0.910)	2.322** (0.979)	1.698 (0.625)
Manual or service	1.061 (0.258)	0.950 (0.231)	1.042 (0.254)	0.943 (0.230)	0.918 (0.223)	0.806 (0.230)
Household economy same	1.222 (0.485)	1.223 (0.484)	1.182 (0.465)	1.251 (0.506)	1.310 (0.547)	1.084 (0.463)



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	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Household economy worse	2.404** (0.928)	2.121* (0.819)	2.271** (0.878)	2.145* (0.846)	2.137* (0.861)	1.550 (0.673)
Authoritarianism		8.268*** (4.076)		6.489*** (3.450)	4.703*** (2.765)	2.450 (1.543)
CSV-authoritarian			2.736** (1.171)			
Minorities adapt				1.871 (0.835)	1.192 (0.507)	1.184 (0.518)
Anti-Māori					7.224*** (5.524)	2.341 (1.407)
Trust in Ardern						0.0105*** (0.00368)
Constant	0.0452*** (0.0174)	0.0160*** (0.00747)	0.0321*** (0.0135)	0.0137*** (0.00669)	0.00654*** (0.00393)	0.225** (0.145)
Observations	3,650	3,650	3,650	3,650	3,650	3,582

\*\*\* p < 0.01

\*\* p < 0.05

\* p < 0.1

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

**Table A8.3 Social structure and right-wing populism? Liking of Advance NZ and the New Conservative Party**

Variables	Advance NZ		New Conservative Party	
	Coeff.	Odds ratio	Coeff.	Odds ratio
Female (male)	-0.486* (0.264)	0.615* (0.162)	-0.514** (0.207)	0.598** (0.124)
Age (18–70)	0.575 (0.472)	1.777 (0.839)	-0.125 (0.418)	0.882 (0.369)
Asian	0.094 (0.482)	1.099 (0.530)	-0.467 (0.385)	0.627 (0.242)
Pasifika	0.879 (0.827)	2.408 (1.992)	-0.671 (0.763)	0.511 (0.390)
Māori	0.749** (0.299)	2.115** (0.633)	-0.238 (0.263)	0.789 (0.207)
Church attendee	0.665* (0.362)	1.944* (0.703)	1.831*** (0.249)	6.241*** (1.552)
Self-employed/employer	0.554 (0.523)	1.741 (0.911)	0.603 (0.388)	1.828 (0.710)

	Advance NZ		New Conservative Party	
Variables	Coeff.	Odds ratio	Coeff.	Odds ratio
Farming	-0.801	0.449	-0.074	0.928
	(0.534)	(0.240)	(0.401)	(0.373)
Manual or service	0.409	1.506	0.432*	1.541*
	(0.303)	(0.457)	(0.230)	(0.354)
Household economy same	-0.398	0.672	-0.474	0.622
	(0.449)	(0.302)	(0.309)	(0.192)
Household economy worse	0.586	1.797	-0.026	0.974
	(0.446)	(0.801)	(0.330)	(0.322)
Minorities adapt	-0.322	0.725	0.723*	2.060*
	(0.445)	(0.323)	(0.383)	(0.788)
Anti-Māori	-0.170	0.844	0.665	1.945
	(0.700)	(0.591)	(0.486)	(0.945)
Constant	-3.946***		-3.894***	
	(0.590)	0.0193***	(0.420)	0.0204***
		(0.0114)		(0.00856)
Observations	3,601		3,601	
r <sup>2</sup> _p	0.0676		0.123	
Ll	-447.7		-601.5	

\*\*\* p < 0.01

\*\* p < 0.05

\* p < 0.1

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

**Table A8.4 Testing the Donovan model**

	Advance NZ		New Conservative Party	
Variables	Coeff.	Odds ratio	Coeff.	Odds ratio
Female (male)	-0.335	0.715	-0.428*	0.652*
	(0.292)	(0.209)	(0.236)	(0.154)
Age (18-70)	-0.038	0.963	0.305	1.357
	(0.451)	(0.435)	(0.339)	(0.460)
University degree	0.267	1.306	0.382	1.465
	(0.298)	(0.389)	(0.302)	(0.443)
Economy worse	0.623	1.865	0.313	1.367
	(0.906)	(1.690)	(0.601)	(0.821)
Anti-immigration	0.924***	2.520***	0.379	1.460
	(0.274)	(0.690)	(0.243)	(0.354)

	Advance NZ		New Conservative Party	
Variables	Coeff.	Odds ratio	Coeff.	Odds ratio
Observe customs	-0.090	0.914	-0.141	0.868
	(0.334)	(0.305)	(0.262)	(0.227)
Obedient	0.322	1.379	0.594**	1.812**
	(0.357)	(0.492)	(0.244)	(0.443)
Strong leader	-0.016	0.984	-0.009	0.992
	(0.013)	(0.0130)	(0.011)	(0.0105)
Right (6-10)	0.385	1.470	0.928***	2.530***
	(0.304)	(0.446)	(0.277)	(0.702)
Constant	-4.490***	0.0112***	-3.959***	0.0191***
	(0.841)	(0.00944)	(0.585)	(0.0112)
Observations	3,549		3,549	
r <sup>2</sup> _p	0.0386		0.0572	
ll	-460.2		-646.7	

\*\*\* p &lt; 0.01

\*\* p &lt; 0.05

\* p &lt; 0.1

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

**Table A8.5 ACT, ACT versus National, and the Donovan model**

	ACT vs all		ACT vs National		ACT vs National	
Variables	Coeff.	Odds ratio	Coeff.	Odds ratio	Coeff.	Odds ratio
Female (male)	-0.550***	0.577***	-0.630***	0.532***	-0.592***	0.553***
	(0.166)	(0.0961)	(0.185)	(0.0984)	(0.192)	(0.106)
Age (18-70)	0.228	1.256	-0.904**	0.405**	-0.973**	0.378**
	(0.331)	(0.416)	(0.396)	(0.160)	(0.418)	(0.158)
Asian (Euro-other)	-0.938**	0.391**	-0.928*	0.395*	-0.854	0.426
	(0.463)	(0.181)	(0.533)	(0.211)	(0.544)	(0.232)
Pasifika (Euro-other)	-0.639	0.528	0.325	1.384	0.066	1.068
	(0.749)	(0.395)	(0.873)	(1.208)	(0.903)	(0.965)
Māori (Euro-other)	-0.855***	0.425***	0.091	1.095	-0.003	0.997
	(0.256)	(0.109)	(0.282)	(0.309)	(0.281)	(0.280)
University degree	-0.488**	0.614**	-0.086	0.918	-0.196	0.822
	(0.194)	(0.119)	(0.216)	(0.198)	(0.219)	(0.180)
Self-employed/ employer	-0.172	0.842	-0.001	0.999	-0.006	0.994
	(0.278)	(0.234)	(0.287)	(0.287)	(0.291)	(0.290)

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Variables	ACT vs all		ACT vs National		ACT vs National	
	Coeff.	Odds ratio	Coeff.	Odds ratio	Coeff.	Odds ratio
Farming (nonmanual)	0.201	1.223	-0.389	0.678	-0.379	0.684
	(0.289)	(0.353)	(0.314)	(0.213)	(0.309)	(0.211)
Manual or service (nonmanual)	0.030	1.030	0.042	1.043	0.059	1.061
	(0.178)	(0.183)	(0.204)	(0.213)	(0.211)	(0.224)
Town (rural)	-0.723***	0.485***	-0.342	0.710	-0.420	0.657
	(0.235)	(0.114)	(0.272)	(0.193)	(0.275)	(0.181)
City suburb (rural)	-1.600***	0.202***	-1.303***	0.272***	-1.415***	0.243***
	(0.331)	(0.0668)	(0.374)	(0.102)	(0.382)	(0.0928)
City (rural)	-0.975***	0.377***	-0.560**	0.571**	-0.672***	0.510***
	(0.223)	(0.0843)	(0.255)	(0.146)	(0.259)	(0.132)
Income	1.179***	3.251***	-0.165	0.847	-0.133	0.875
	(0.316)	(1.028)	(0.373)	(0.316)	(0.380)	(0.333)
Assets	0.043	1.044	-0.154**	0.857**	-0.177**	0.838**
	(0.064)	(0.066)	(0.070)	(0.0599)	(0.070)	(0.0589)
Union household	-0.653**	0.521**	-0.321	0.725	-0.372	0.689
	(0.264)	(0.137)	(0.291)	(0.211)	(0.293)	(0.202)
Church attendee	-0.435	0.647	-0.484	0.616	-0.363	0.695
	(0.289)	(0.187)	(0.295)	(0.182)	(0.301)	(0.209)
Anti-immigration					0.092	1.096
					(0.186)	(0.204)
Observe customs					0.349	1.418
					(0.254)	(0.361)
Obedient					-0.663***	0.515***
					(0.232)	(0.119)
Strong leader					-0.014	0.986
					(0.010)	(0.00950)
Right (6-10)					0.491**	1.635**
					(0.228)	(0.373)
Constant	-1.995***	0.136***	0.677	1.968	0.408	1.504
	(0.359)	(0.0488)	(0.464)	(0.914)	(0.540)	(0.813)
Observations	3,320	3,320	875	875	875	875
r <sup>2</sup> _p	0.0862		0.0601		0.0851	
ll	-710.0		-452.2		-440.2	

\*\*\* p < 0.01

\*\* p < 0.05

\* p < 0.1

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

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