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The Disappearing ‘Team of Five Million’? The road to the 2023 election

Jack Vowles, Jennifer Curtin, and Lara Greaves

The idea of the ‘Team of Five Million’ epitomised Jacinda Ardern’s ability to find the right words at the right time when her country needed steady and determined leadership. The metaphor represented the ideal of collective effort by all members of society, all working together. High levels of compliance with lockdowns and other restrictions confirmed its resonance. But to the side there were dissenters, and their number would steadily increase in the aftermath of the 2020 election. Indeed, on the day she announced the date of the 2023 election, Ardern also announced her resignation as prime minister and Member of Parliament. Here we conclude our analysis of the 2020 election by reviewing the findings of previous chapters and summarising events in the months before the 2023 election. We reassess the framing of New Zealand voters as ‘a team’ before discussing the longer-term implications.

Was the Team of Five Million more than a metaphor?

As explained in Chapter 1, the scale of Labour’s victory in 2020 was momentous. In a historic net shift of votes, Labour acquired an unprecedented single-party majority under the MMP electoral

system. Nearly 60 per cent of the votes were cast for parties of the left that supported the government's pandemic response with few if any qualifications. Age-eligible valid vote turnout hit a 20-year peak at 76.5 per cent. Nonetheless, the sociodemographic foundations of party voting did not appreciably change. There were more Labour votes in the provinces, but this simply reflected the national trend. Farmers, employers, and the self-employed still resisted Labour more than others, as did those with high incomes and numerous assets. While turnout among younger voters was up, they were still disproportionately represented among those who did not vote. Māori and Pasifika leaned toward Labour, but also towards not voting at all. The call for a collective response to an emergency could temporarily obscure but could not transcend ongoing social divisions.

Chapter 2 challenges analysts for whom the election outcome was more about the pandemic's emotional impact than a substantive appraisal of Labour's performance. Sceptics have argued that, in countries holding 'Covid' elections, voters opted for an incumbent government, for conservative parties willing to 'take charge', or just rallied around the flag. No one can deny the emotions brought out by Covid-19, particularly in those countries hardest hit. Yet, evidence from New Zealand and elsewhere suggests that if voters had the opportunity to go to the polls in the year or two after the crisis emerged, governments that kept cases under control and their people safe were more likely to be re-elected than those that could not. This was particularly the case if government leadership was competent and clear in its communications. In such situations, the quality of elites matters as much, if not more than, the quality of collective judgement among the public. The ability to inspire trust in the government's decisions was Jacinda Ardern's great contribution for which she will be long remembered. Not all were convinced, but when it most mattered they were a small minority.

The Labour Party was given a temporary reward: an unprecedented victory. But the high net shift of votes was boosted by increased turnout and otherwise based on very much the same proportion of changing votes as previous elections. In 2020, those shifts simply tended to go one way more than others. There was no sign of a fundamental policy preference shift among voters. Approval of the Covid-19 response and trust and confidence in Jacinda Arden were responsible for a strong shift among voters towards the Labour Party. As expected, those who changed were mainly median or 'centre-ground' voters that Labour would have no other reasons to retain on an ongoing basis. There was no sign of a realignment in 2020. Only if

an expanded number of younger voters were to remain engaged with the electoral process would a longer-term shift emerge over time (van der Brug and Rekker 2021).

Chapter 3 documents the increasing focus on social media in the 2020 election campaign. Voter receipt of political party social media messaging was lower than many might have expected. Despite the pandemic, traditional campaign methods such as direct mail and person-to-person contact still dominated. A little less than 12 per cent reported party contact by social media although 80 per cent reported they used the internet for accessing political information. By its nature, social media has the potential to polarise by encouraging members of groups to reinforce their opinions in 'echo chambers'. During the campaign, the major political parties kept their Facebook messaging positive, relatively accurate, and targeted swinging voters. In the final week and perceiving its imminent defeat, National Party messaging became more negative and directed more strongly to retaining its core voters. Disinformation was almost entirely confined to the echo chambers of the very small parties opposing the government's pandemic response. The Māori Party provided a good example of how social media can be used effectively by a small party with limited resources. Jacinda Ardern's positive social media messaging was the most pervasive and influential.

Chapter 4 addresses the increase in turnout in 2020. New Zealand politics differs from that of other countries where some political parties actively seek to suppress turnout. In New Zealand, the institutional encouragement of turnout and inclusion are widely accepted norms and there are very few barriers to casting a vote. Voting rights even extend beyond citizens to those from other countries with permanent resident status. The New Zealand Electoral Commission makes strong efforts to maximise turnout, including advance voting and election day registration. In 2020, those efforts were redoubled. The election was delayed to ensure it could be held in the absence of community Covid cases thus making it possible for parties to campaign and voters to be protected. Nonetheless, contact between candidates and voters during the campaign was lower than at the two previous elections.

The 2020 election was held concurrently with two referendums: one on euthanasia and one on the legalisation of cannabis. At least some of the turnout increase in 2020 could have been generated by interest in the referendums rather than in the general election. An alternative explanation could be that generalised political trust and political efficacy had increased

because of support for the government's pandemic response. But while generalised political trust is relatively high in New Zealand compared with other democracies, there was no such increase in either of those traditional correlates of turnout. This finding pours further cold water on the idea that the 2020 election will have long-lasting effects on political behaviour.

Chapter 5 discusses the return of the Māori Party to parliament. On the surface, this appears to indicate a loss of support for Labour among Māori, thus questioning the metaphor of the Team of Five Million. One potential reason for Māori disillusionment with Labour was the government's inability to resolve a *hāpū* land claim at Ihumātao in South Auckland. But while those on the Māori roll were critical of the government in its handling of that matter, their overall rating of Labour remained high, and their support for the Māori Party did not increase. Voters for Labour and the Māori Party tended to be similarly aligned at the left of centre. Identification with Māori culture is a better predictor of Māori Party vote choice than left-right position. The new Māori Party leadership could not compete with the popularity of Jacinda Ardern. Nonetheless, the Māori Party held its ground at the 2020 election. Its capture of the Waiariki electorate provided the platform for its success in winning no less than six of the seven Māori electorates at the 2023 election.

Chapter 6 considers the implications of border closure and its impact on political attitudes about immigration. New Zealand is a society based on immigration and more than one-quarter of its population in 2020 was born elsewhere. Large parts of the economy rely on immigrant labour. As noted in Chapter 2, tourism normally generates very significant economic activity. Yet, the inclusive implications of the metaphor of the Team of Five Million are somewhat belied by the fact that half the electorate indicated they would prefer a lower level of immigration than that before the pandemic. This is consistent with data from previous elections in that public opinion about immigration has remained relatively stable over time. A declining number of people felt that immigration has negative economic or cultural consequences. However, there continues to be hostility towards those entering New Zealand as big investors or non-residents in the housing market. Immigrant access to welfare benefits for those on temporary work visas is also unpopular.

Chapter 7 analyses the significance of Jacinda Ardern's leadership and the gender gaps in voting behaviour and attitudes to social and health policy in the context of the pandemic. Ardern was widely known and appreciated for her policy rhetoric emphasising kindness, inclusion, hope, and a transformative policy agenda that would address poverty, inequality, and climate change. This rhetoric sat easily alongside the government's public health-first approach and came across as authentic and trustworthy.

In the end, women were significantly more likely to vote Labour in 2020 than men: indeed, under Ardern, Labour had more voting support among women than under any previous prime minister. Only a minority of people believed that men were better leaders than women. The positive experience of Ardern's leadership in a situation of crisis appears to have shifted attitudes to an even more positive appreciation of female leadership among both men and women. This is despite slow progress on several policy issues that were found to matter to New Zealand women. Only a small minority among both older and younger men tended to resist that trend. Post-election, many of these voices grew louder. Time will tell whether the new Labour leader, Chris Hipkins, can maintain Labour's appeal to women voters generated by Ardern.

Chapter 8 examines those who did not accept membership of the Team of Five Million. The National Party generally supported the government's pandemic response and occasional criticisms by its MPs were often off-message and failed to hit their marks. National's succession of leadership changes weakened the party's credibility. Those opposed to the government's policy response to Covid-19 tended to be male, aged between 41 and 60, farmers, self-employed, and those whose household incomes had declined over the previous year. In terms of ideology, authoritarians and those less sympathetic to the interests of Māori were more disposed to be against the government. A lack of trust in Jacinda Ardern had a very strong additional effect on people with those beliefs.

The two most prominent small parties opposing the pandemic response were the New Conservatives and Advance NZ. The New Conservatives drew more from religious Pākehā social conservatism; Advance NZ from Māori. The voters supporting these fringe parties were ideologically amorphous and the parties representing them were equally broad in their political positions. These divergent interests make the future consolidation of support behind a single party or coalition of parties unlikely.

At the 2020 election, the ACT party managed to re-establish its position in the party system on the neoliberal right. Like National, ACT supported the Covid-19 elimination strategy but criticised aspects of its implementation. Most of its votes came from previous National voters and disproportionately from men and people on high incomes and in rural areas. While authoritarianism is associated with both National and ACT voters, ACT voters were less authoritarian than those for National.

Chapter 9 considers the apparent eclipse of climate change in an election dominated by the pandemic. The reality of climate change is now accepted by most politicians and voters in New Zealand, but a ‘team’ approach is lacking on what and how much the government should do to address the problem. Under Labour since 2017, a combination of negotiation and legislation has created a framework for reducing carbon dioxide and methane emissions but there has been little real progress in its practical implementation. For most people, climate change is not perceived as an issue important enough to shape their voting choice. They accept it as a problem that will affect their children and grandchildren, but not so much themselves. About four in 10 are sceptical that collective action can reduce emissions, about half think it can, although six in 10 support government action to do so. It was unlikely that climate change would come back as an urgent issue in 2023 given the post-Covid focus on the cost of living. This intensified concern about economic issues is the main theme of the discussion that follows, following the path towards the 2023 election.

Post-pandemic politics

The temporary nature of Labour’s election victory is borne out by trends in public polling since the 2020 election (see Figure 10.1). The downward movement of Labour polling is apparent from about April–May 2021. National vote intentions remained flat until November of that year, when former Air New Zealand CEO Christopher Luxon took over the party’s leadership reins from Judith Collins. A polling shift to the right was apparent from at least August but ACT was the main beneficiary. Once put in charge, Luxon began to capture a bigger share for National. A further fall in Labour polling coincided with the number of Covid-19 cases exploding in March and April 2022.

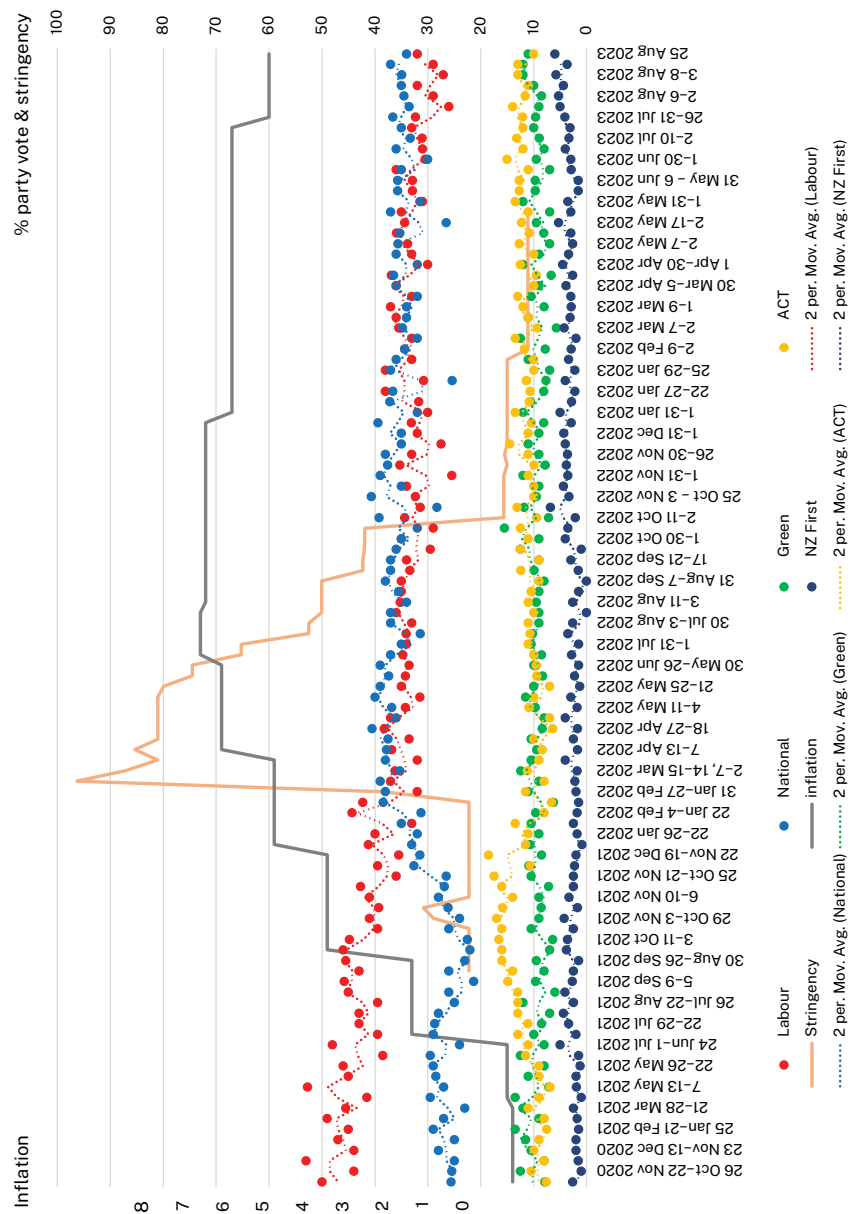


Figure 10.1 Political polls, inflation, and the stringency index, 2020–2023

Sources: Our World in Data (2022); StatsNZ (2023); Wikipedia (2023).

From mid-2022, the polling state of play was similar to that immediately before the pandemic in late 2019—that is, a tight race between National and Labour. But there were differences. Despite some internal disruptions, the Green Party remained further above the 5 per cent threshold than it had been in 2019. The Greens also won the Auckland Central electorate seat in 2020 and, as such, popular local MP Chlöe Swarbrick provides further insurance. The ACT party had become much more than the one-seat appendage to the National Party that it was in the recent past. Its MPs gained experience and credibility. Meanwhile, Te Pāti Māori (the Māori Party) could again have played a critical role in government formation.

By the end of 2022, the National Party was regularly polling ahead of Labour, often by significant margins. The role played by Jacinda Ardern in evoking the Team of Five Million to combat Covid-19 had lost its shine. While gained through competent and caring pandemic management, her government's popularity had waned along with the threat of Covid-19. The unexpected resignation of Ardern as prime minister in January 2023 and her replacement with Chris Hipkins recaptured a Labour lead in the polls, although the margin was small. At least until the middle of 2023, there appeared to be no clear or consistent gap between the two major parties. However, as ACT was tending to poll ahead of the Green Party, the parties on the right were seen as most likely to reach a winning margin. The unknown quantity was the Māori Party. Polling in the first half of 2023 indicated that if it were to hold at least one electorate seat it could hold the balance of power, giving Labour a possible edge.¹

On assuming the Labour Party leadership and the job of Prime Minister, Chris Hipkins initiated a 'bonfire' of policies. The time for Ardern's inspirational leadership style had passed. While the pandemic could take much of the blame, most of Ardern's lofty goals for 'transformation' had been at best marginally achieved. Labour had taken advantage of its single-party majority, moving ahead with ambitious policy changes, the number and scope of which challenged the capacity of its Cabinet and the public service. Many of these policies encountered strong opposition from the public or lobbyists representing entrenched interests, including on issues related to water reform, climate change mitigation, and Māori co-governance. Several other policy options were dropped or set aside until after the 2023 election, including a contributory social insurance scheme, a merger of public radio

1 National ruled out working with Te Pāti Māori on 10 May 2023 (RNZ 2023a).

and television broadcasting, hate speech legislation, and legislation that would clarify the definition of contractors and employees. The government's attention turned towards addressing the effects of post-Covid inflation and its sometimes-devastating effects on real incomes. As Figure 10.1 shows, increasing inflation between mid-2021 and mid-2022 ran in tandem with Labour's declining support in the polls.

We can hypothesise that three factors lie behind the poll movements since the 2020 election: the rise of inflation, the leadership changes, and the diminishing salience of Covid-19, as measured by the Blavatnik School of Government's 'stringency index' (BSG 2020–23).² Inspecting Figure 10.1, inflation appears to have been the dominant factor behind Labour's decline from its 2020 election peak. The upward steps in the announced levels run in the opposite direction to Labour's downward polling. If we assume the announcement of the inflation rate over the previous quarter sparks the upward step, the parallel is clear.³

Data collected by Ipsos throughout 2022 and into 2023 confirm the effects of rising inflation on public perceptions (Ipsos 2022b, 2023). In February 2023, inflation/the cost of living was named by 65 per cent of those surveyed as one of the top three issues facing New Zealand. The economy in general was mentioned by 22 per cent. The Ipsos government approval rating on a zero–ten scale remained at an average of 5.4, just within positive territory, compared with 7.3 at the time of the 2020 election. The National Party was in the lead in assessments of parties' ability to manage three of the six top issues: inflation, law and order, and the economy. Labour ranked ahead on the second most salient issue, housing and its price, and on healthcare and hospitals, the issue ranked fourth.

Together with unemployment and growth, inflation forms one of the trinity of economic factors expected to play into public opinion and voting preferences. For the past 30 years, inflation has been relatively low. Economic growth has been the prime focus of analysis in New Zealand as elsewhere (Gardener 2016). When inflation has been discussed in the literature and

2 The measure that estimates the degree of Covid-19 restrictions. Systematic and robust statistical analysis of the polls would run foul of several unresolvable problems. This is particularly problematic for the possible effects of change in the economy. While many households and individuals feel the effects of inflation personally, its official estimate is indexed through a set of complex measurements and only reported quarterly. There are not enough measurements of inflation to correlate with the poll movements.

3 That is, the official release of the data rather than the real inflation experienced over the previous months is the trigger, reinforced by media coverage that reports and frames the information.

commentary, it has been set beside unemployment. It was believed there was an inevitable trade-off between the two, but that relationship is now understood to be much more complex (Gabriel et al. 2022). It was also assumed that inflation was most damaging to the political fortunes of centre-right parties and that unemployment was most damaging to those of the centre-left (Swank 1993; Carlsen 2000). Inflation tends to cut into the value of assets and the savings of those on high incomes, while the risk and reality of unemployment most affect those on low incomes.

In May 2022, Ipsos (2022a) reported marginally less concern about inflation among New Zealanders on low incomes, but the difference was not a big one. Inflation is less likely to affect those on low incomes where there are forms of social protection to compensate them, particularly if they are inflation-linked. Welfare benefits, low-income family financial support through the Working for Families program, and the minimum wage were increased in April 2022, partially cushioning the blow for the most vulnerable (Edmunds and Carroll 2022). A further one-off payment to low-income earners was also announced in May, extending to almost 40 per cent of the population. Tax on petrol was also temporarily cut to reduce the burden on drivers.

The Working for Families increase also penetrates further up the income ladder, but only for those with children. Those on middle incomes without children have been given less relief, providing a large residue of discontent although wage rises over the period of rising inflation have been significant, offering some relief (Dann 2022). While a range of benefits were increased with the potential to ameliorate political fallout (Park and Shin 2019), many doubt that New Zealand's social programs are sufficiently up to their task.

A focus on economic issues tends to shift the discursive advantage to parties of the centre-right. There is a form of popular wisdom that believes that because the National Party draws its ideas and support from business, its leaders must be more competent at managing the national economy. While running a business is not the same as running an entire economy, most people do not appreciate the differences (Krugman 2009).

As Chapter 2 explains, New Zealand's economic stimulus to meet the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 was one of the largest in the OECD, although several other countries were not far behind. Yet, as inflation peaked in mid-2022, the latest inflation rate for the second quarter of 7.1 per cent was in the lower half of the OECD countries—very close

to levels in Sweden, Germany, and Canada. Sweden's Covid response was one of those with the lightest touch in the OECD, but it did not escape the high inflation of 2022. Indeed, comparing OECD countries, the growth of inflation in 2022 appears to have had very little relation to the size of the Covid-19 stimulus (Renney 2022). The baseline increase in inflation is driven predominantly by global trends. The flow-on effect of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has pushed up energy and food prices. China's efforts to eliminate Covid-19 cut its growth and disrupted trade supply chains. By early 2023, New Zealand's inflation rate was tracking only a little above the average among advanced economies (IMF 2023).

Most of the criticism of Labour's economic response centres on the Reserve Bank, which is responsible for setting base interest rates. The Reserve Bank is theoretically independent of day-to-day government control or influence, but in 2018, the bank's criteria for setting rates upward or downward were widened by Labour beyond inflation alone, adding the support of 'maximum sustainable employment'. With its emphasis on wage subsidies channelled through employers affected by lockdowns and other restrictions, the government's Covid-19 response also strongly reflected that concern. Almost all businesses that qualified accepted the subsidies. They were easily accessed and almost certainly made the government's Covid response far more palatable to businesses than any alternative means of delivery.

With the support of the government, the Reserve Bank also kept interest rates low and expanded the money supply. The bank's monetary expansion funded a large part of the government's own borrowing to pay for the wage subsidies and other measures. The Treasury issued new government bonds, which banks purchased and sold to the Reserve Bank, which paid for them using the money it created. Unemployment remained low. However, through their encouragement of bank lending, these policies had the effect of raising the prices of housing and other assets, benefiting asset-holders and thereby increasing asset inequality. New Zealand's house prices increased by almost one-third between the end of 2019 and the end of 2021—the second-highest growth in the OECD. Despite the availability of relatively low-interest mortgages, because of the rising prices, people on lower and middle incomes began finding it more and more difficult to buy a home. Economic stimulus kept economies from crashing; with the benefit of hindsight, many economists now argue that it went on for too long, not just in New Zealand but also around the world (Wilkinson and Wheeler 2022; but see Pullar-Strecker 2022). In combination with the war in Ukraine and supply chain disruption from China, inflation has been boosted by all these

developments, both domestic and foreign. Meanwhile, the Reserve Bank has begun selling the bonds back to the Treasury, which then ‘retires’ them, gradually reducing the money supply.

The rise of inflation has had one more positive consequence: a fall in house prices. But that fall has been generated by rising interest rates. Seeking to bring inflation under control, the Reserve Bank has increased the base rate at which it will loan to commercial banks, thus obliging them to increase their rates to lenders. While houses are more affordable, the interest rates on loans to purchase them have increased. The housing market is more favourable to buyers, but not for the majority of those who require mortgages.

These were considerable political and economic challenges for Labour to face as the incumbent government leading into the 2023 election. There was residual discontent with the post-elimination Covid-19 response, including the vaccination rollout that began in 2021—later than in most comparable countries. Vulnerable older age groups were targeted first, which became a matter of controversy. Epidemiological research has shown that for a combination of reasons Māori and Pasifika populations were more vulnerable to Covid-19 than the majority Pākehā population (Steyn et al. 2020). This was soon borne out by data from cases as outbreaks began to take hold in the local population. Making matters worse, anti-vaccination messages originally sourced offshore were being targeted at these groups. Outreach efforts spearheaded by Māori and Pasifika organisations were required, and the official response was slower than what Māori and Pasifika health experts argued was needed.

As the more infectious Delta variant entered the community in August 2021, another lockdown was enforced briefly across the whole country, with Auckland and its immediate surroundings remaining in that condition until December. Criticism of the delay in the vaccine rollout when measured against other countries was widespread. In-depth polling detected increasing opinion that it was time to ‘move on’ and ‘live with the virus’ (Lord Ashcroft 2021). Figure 10.1 indicates the timing of the August–December lockdown by way of the stringency index (BSG 2020–23). Labour polling held up at first but began to fall back with the new inflation figures and as the lockdown continued in Auckland and its environs.

Early in 2022, the appearance of the greatly more infectious but less fatal Omicron variant of Covid-19 made it no longer feasible to contain the infection by contact tracing and public testing. The government had

been restricting the use of do-it-yourself rapid antigen tests (RATs) not just because of their lower reliability but also to accurately monitor and control cases (Verrall 2021). Early in March, cases began to surge. Tracing and public testing became ineffective; RATs were made available. For a few weeks, despite likely underreporting, New Zealand had one of the world's highest case ratios, reflecting the country's very small number of cases until that point. The Covid-19 dam had been breached. But by then New Zealand had attained a high level of vaccination, limiting cases and, of much greater importance, greatly reducing the risk of serious illness and death.

Initially, the government had rejected the idea of wide use of mandates to make vaccination compulsory for people in jobs in which there was face-to-face contact with the public. To protect people and to encourage vaccination, mandates were gradually extended from border workers, health and care providers, police, and defence, through to fire service workers and teachers; all these groups were covered by November 2021. In January 2022, vaccination became required for people working in and entering hospitality and close-contact businesses: bars, restaurants, and all shops except food retailers and pharmacies. The main purpose was to incentivise vaccination among those hitherto casually reluctant. This strategy significantly steepened the upward curve of vaccinations (Ministry of Health 2022), but it also led to the mobilisation of anti-vaccination sentiments around an anti-mandate and anti-masking campaign that began to attract many people not opposed to vaccination itself. Over 24 days from early February 2022, against a background of increasing Covid-19 cases, up to 3,000 protesters occupied the grounds of Parliament House in Wellington. There were scenes of increasing violence. Protesters were eventually dispersed by forceful police action on 2 March.

While most New Zealanders opposed the parliamentary protest because of its violence and disregard of other people's rights, anti-mandate messages began to take hold. Polling in February 2022 estimated that 26 per cent of people wanted fewer restrictions, 24 per cent wanted them to be more robust, and support for the government response was down to 63 per cent from 83 per cent a year earlier (Manhire 2022). While the organisers of the protests were associated with the small anti-establishment political parties, none had ever gained parliamentary representation. New Zealand First leader Winston Peters visited the protest unmasked. On 23 March, after the vaccination rate had significantly improved, the government announced

most vaccination mandates would cease to apply on 4 April. A second booster shot was made available to those eligible in July 2022, with further boosters made available later to the most vulnerable groups.

By the middle of 2022, the sense of unity represented by the idea of the Team of Five Million had not entirely disappeared, but the numbers opposed to it had grown. After two waves of Omicron infections, the relatively high level of vaccination was reducing vulnerability to illness, making it possible to establish a balance that could stretch hospital resources, but not break them.⁴ This balance relied on the isolation of those infected and their household contacts and continued mask-wearing in most confined public places, although compliance began to wane (Coughlan 2022; DPMC 2022). The vaccine mandate almost certainly reduced Covid-19 incidence but there remains the possibility of negative effects on public trust and social cohesion, with increased political polarisation a real possibility (Bardosh et al. 2022). The ‘team’ metaphor no longer resonates in the public discourse.

Throughout 2022, the government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic remained a live issue, continuing to ‘worry’ 44 per cent of the public in May. However, New Zealanders remained divided between those who believed that all restrictions should be removed and those who preferred retention or strengthening of restrictions (DPMC 2022). While disagreement about the need for restrictions moved into the background of debate over time, it remained a potential source of polarisation that tends to track partisan preferences between centre-left and centre-right.

Indeed, polarisation was predicted to be a feature of the 2023 campaign and beyond. Indigenous rights in Aotearoa New Zealand and the place of Māori *iwi* (tribal council) and *hapū* (kinship group) in the political process have become a ‘wedge’ issue for several parties on the right. Commissioned as a background paper to lead to the implementation of the previous National government’s signing of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the *He Puapua* report initiated by then Māori affairs minister Nanaia Mahuta recommended a range of options for a much greater role for Māori in government (Charters et al. 2020). The substantive, long-term options included creating a separate legal system and an upper house of

4 In August 2022, 3,982,068 people were fully vaccinated—78 per cent of the total population and 95 per cent of the Ministry of Health’s defined target group of those aged 12 or more. Comparative analysis continued to confirm that New Zealand was one of the most successful countries in preventing deaths from Covid-19. Excess deaths remained in negative territory, even after two waves of the Omicron variant (Morton 2022).

Māori representatives. The report was not released to the Cabinet, which at the time included New Zealand First ministers who would have opposed it. *He Puapua* was not available to the public until early in 2021 after it was leaked to the National and ACT parties.

The prime minister quickly rejected the idea of a Māori upper house, but many of the discussion paper's other recommendations were taken up as part of policy work foreshadowed in Labour's 2017 and 2020 election policies. These included enabling the creation of additional Māori wards in local government, a Māori health authority, a school history curriculum with a strong focus on Māori history, greater use of the Māori language in mainstream media and public organisations, and *iwi* co-governance with local government representatives in four new regionally based 'entities' controlling water supply, stormwater, and wastewater: the 'Three Waters'.

Consultations on *He Puapua* took place with Māori *iwi* and opinion leaders, to be followed by a paper to the Cabinet and wider public consultation. But Minister of Māori Affairs Willie Jackson requested revisions, anticipating that the draft would not be accepted by Cabinet (Moir 2022). In the end, no revision acceptable to Jackson was submitted by the authors of *He Puapua* and the matter was shelved.

The Three Waters proposals became the biggest focus of public and local government criticism. Local government would continue to own and hold the debt of the consolidated assets while the authority structure would involve co-governance with Māori *iwi* representatives. Local government rights of control and ownership would be diluted by half and set several steps back from management, diminishing accountability (Ludbrook 2022). Thirty-one of the 76 local councils, including Auckland, came out in opposition.

An initial promise that these 'entities' would not be imposed was broken. When Three Waters came under review as part of the 'policy bonfire', after several weeks it was announced that the four entities would become ten. Their boundaries would be defined not by Māori *iwi* areas as in the original plan but by those of the regional government. The numbers appointed to the representative bodies would increase to include all local councils, but so, too, would those appointed by *iwi*, continuing to maintain the model of co-governance.

Meanwhile, the direct appointment of two Ngāi Tahu councillors to Canterbury's otherwise elected regional government, Environment Canterbury, was passed into law. A core democratic principle of one person, one vote of equal value was questioned by the Māori Party and some Labour MPs, including Jackson himself (Jackson 2022). Labour's Tāmami Coffey argued in parliament that 'there is nothing to preclude us being able to tweak democracy to make it work for us here in Aotearoa' (Coffey, cited in Edwards 2022). The idea of democracy itself was challenged (Satherley 2021), the criticism justified by its empowering a 'tyranny of the majority' and thus 'white majority rule' (Randerson 2022).

The danger of a damaging 'culture war' around these developments and the associated rhetoric was widely recognised. The National, ACT, and New Zealand First parties were strongly critical and called for more substantive debate, with ACT demanding a referendum (Seymour 2022). In response, National and ACT were often chastised for their statements that were frequently interpreted as 'racist' (for example, Cheng 2021) or as playing the 'race card' (Stuff 2021).

The implications in public opinion and political behaviour remained uncertain. In 2004, Pākehā opinion was strongly mobilised against Māori claims to title over the foreshore and seabed that had potentially been enabled by a ruling of the Court of Appeal (Palmer 2006, 199–204; Cullen 2021, 330–46). The National Party campaigned strongly for legislation to override the court and there was a massive increase in its polling support. Labour subsequently legislated in response to the court's decision to establish Crown ownership but was met with strong Māori opposition that led to the formation of the Māori Party.

Much of National's 2004 poll rise proved temporary, although the party kept many of its gains. The 2005 election was extremely close and fought partly on the issue. Labour edged ahead narrowly. Policy related to Māori was the most salient issue in the 2005 campaign, mentioned by 19 per cent of NZES respondents, followed by health on 17 per cent (Vowles et al. 2006). The majority opinion was strongly against Māori claims to the foreshore and seabed. In a confused and polarised debate, many people on both sides misunderstood the rights in question as being for exclusive freehold rather than for customary title—a matter all parties then in parliament agreed needed clarification. Later legislation by National in consultation with the Māori Party established that the foreshore and seabed would be owned by

no one and claims of customary title would be determined through the legal process, and the issue has subsided. As Chapter 5 explains, bitterness remains among many Māori.

In 2022 and 2023, there was much less evidence of such strong Pākehā opinion. Ipsos issue salience polling put Māori-related policy issues at a very low level of interest. Depending on question phrasing, most polling on Three Waters showed majority opposition, but many people had no opinion, which is not surprising given the complexity of the proposals and a lack of incisive analysis in the mainstream media and free-access platforms.⁵ The foreshore and seabed claim appeared to propose restrictions on people's access to the seashore; access to beaches is regarded as a fundamental right by many New Zealanders. Rights to control the nation's collective plumbing systems do not provoke the same emotions. Nonetheless, Three Waters continued to have traction, particularly in the provinces where local councils regard the policy as an effective confiscation of their assets.

Over the years public opinion has become more sympathetic to Māori issues and claims. As Figure 10.2 shows, opinion about the place of the Treaty of Waitangi in law has changed since 2005, from most against to most in favour. In the 2020 NZES, as a proxy for the principle of co-governance, agreement or disagreement with the statement 'Māori should have more say in all government decisions' showed 27 per cent in agreement and 42 per cent in opposition. Willie Jackson's caution in taking the first draft response to *He Puapua* to the Cabinet seemed justified. Among people of Māori descent, there was more support: 54 per cent agreed that Māori should have more say. But when asked about the idea of a Māori upper house, 25 per cent of people of Māori descent were in favour, with 42 per cent opposed. Whether it is a sleeping issue or one to be mobilised later, the idea of co-governance with Māori *iwi* and *hapū* remains in the background rather than to the fore. However, there was increasing concern about the danger of 'pernicious polarisation' driven from both sides of the debate (Salmond 2022). As the election drew near, growing support for the New Zealand First Party was putting it above the party vote threshold for parliamentary representation in some polls. Its conservative attitudes to the Treaty and so-called woke issues appeared to strike a chord in public opinion.

5 The *1News* Kantar poll of January 2022 put 40 per cent against and 26 per cent in favour (1News 2022). A Horizon Research poll in November 2021 put 48 per cent against and 24 per cent in favour (Horizon Research 2021). A summary of 10 polls is also available online (theFacts 2022).

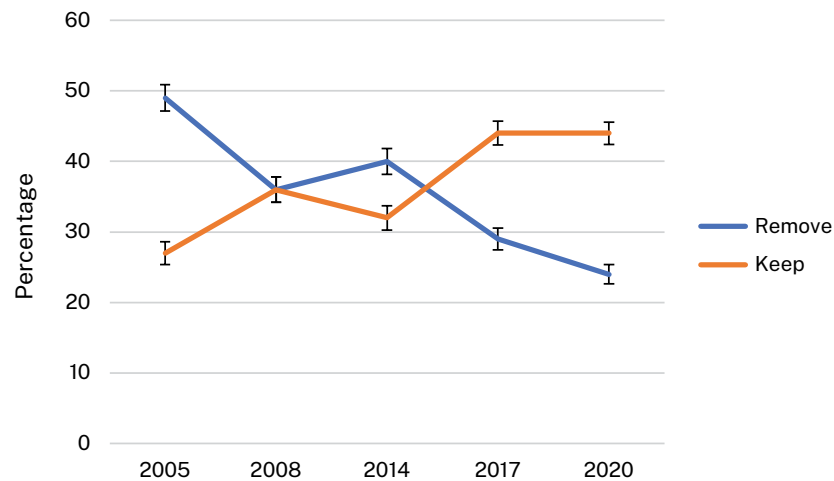


Figure 10.2 ‘Remove or keep Treaty in the law’

Note: The question was in agreement or disagreement with the statement: ‘The Treaty of Waitangi should be removed from the law.’

Sources: Vowles et al. (2006, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2022f).

While ‘culture war’-style politics was becoming more prominent as 2023 wore on, economic issues remained at the centre of public debate. The National Party’s promise of tax cuts to address inflation—themselves likely to be inflationary—was revised after disparagement not only from Labour but also from ACT. By mid-2022, Luxon’s performance as National Party leader was coming under increasing criticism. His stock responses in short interviews went down well among journalists, but in extended interviews, he often proved unwilling or unable to answer key questions in any detail (Hooton 2022; Trevett 2022). As Luxon’s performance improved, it was still open to criticism as excessively cautious and scripted (Hooton 2023).

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Chris Hipkins was proving a more effective Labour leader than many had expected. His high public exposure during the height of the pandemic as the minister in charge of the response made him familiar to the public. His propensity for straight-talking made a sharp contrast to Ardern’s inspirational rhetoric and was more in keeping with the times. Moreover, Hipkins and his new Cabinet gained good media coverage after the severe flooding in Auckland and elsewhere in late January 2023, followed by the devastation of Cyclone Gabrielle in February. As New Zealand’s recent past has shown, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and a pandemic can provide a politically valuable platform for a leader who can demonstrate competence and communicate in a way that builds both

trust and likeability. However, by the onset of the election campaign, Chris Hipkins's lustre had begun to fade and his leadership ratings had fallen close to those of Christopher Luxon (RNZ 2023b). A month out from the election Luxon's approval ratings were holding firm while those of Hipkins had plummeted. There was to be no opportunity for Labour to recover lost votes before election day. While National was only able to reach 38 per cent share of the vote, Labour's result was just short of 27 per cent, close to halving the sitting government's share of both votes and seats. An analysis of whether this represents a new period of polarisation, or something else, will be the subject of the 2023 New Zealand Election Study.

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