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New Zealand elections: what you need to know

The polls are virtually neck-and-neck. Will Labour's charismatic leader prevent National from winning a fourth term?

New Zealanders go to the polls on Saturday to choose their next government. The island country of 4.7 million people has been getting a lot of international attention in the run up to its elections, thanks to the meteoric rise of Labour leader, Jacinda Ardern, who is hoping to prevent the centre-right National Party from winning a fourth term. Brian Roper, Associate Professor of Politics at the University of Otago, filled us in on the background.

Six weeks ago, New Zealand's conservatives were comfortably leading the polls. But then Jacinda Ardern became Labour Party leader and support for the party shot up. What happened to bring about this turnaround in Labour's fortunes?

New Zealand electoral politics is dominated by the centre-right National Party, which has been in government since 2008, and the centre-left Labour Party, last in government from 1999 to 2008.

The 2017 general election has involved a remarkable degree of political volatility. As a result of disastrously low polling, Andrew Little, one of the least charismatic political leaders in New Zealand's political history, resigned as leader of the Labour Party and was replaced by Jacinda Ardern on 1 August.

Jacinda Ardern's rise to the leadership of the Labour Party was viewed favourably by much of the media, particularly by Patrick Gower of TV3 Newshub, who accurately stated that in her first press conference she was 'powerful, composed, eloquent - and actually quite funny'. Whereas previous Labour leaders David Shearer, David Cunliffe and Andrew Little were mediocre orators, weak debaters, and as charismatic as blocks of wood, Jacinda Ardern clearly has the 'X' factor- a powerful speaker, strong debater, intelligent political operator, and a she has genuine sense of humour.

In the main leaders' debates, Ardern has performed strongly. When the conservative National party leader and current Prime Minister, Bill English, stated: 'Now the stardust has settled, you're starting to see the policy... ', Ardern immediately bit back:

'This stardust won't settle, because none of us should settle... New Zealand shouldn't settle for anything less than taking on head-on the challenges that we face this election.'

The polls suggest that Ardern's leadership is bringing a surge in Labour support amongst young people, women, and working-class voters. Indeed, despite a high degree of volatility from one poll to the next, the polls have traced an astonishing rise in Labour's ratings at the expense of National and the two most significant minor parties – the Green Party to the left, and the centrist and nationalist NZ First Party which is to the right of Labour.

Even if Labour fail to win the election, Ardern is likely to remain as leader. Although some of the domestic political commentary has been overblown with the use of terms such as 'Jacindamania' and the 'Jacinda effect', she has done remarkably well in lifting Labour's poll ratings from 25-28 per cent in 2017 prior to August to 37-44 per cent since she became leader.

What is Ardern's political background?

Although Ardern is the youngest leader of the Labour Party since it was established in 1916, at 37 years of age, she is an experienced politician having already served as an MP for nine years. Before entering parliament and becoming New Zealand's youngest ever MP in 2008, she worked as a researcher for the New Zealand Labour Party and then as an official in the British Cabinet Office under the UK Labour Government. In 2007, Ardern was elected President of the International Union of Socialist Youth (IUSY). With respect to her political views, Ardern is essentially a third way social democrat, to the right of Jeremy Corbyn but somewhat to the left of her New Zealand predecessor – Andrew Little.

How is incumbent PM Bill English perceived and what does he stand for?

Polls show between 27.7 to 37 per cent support for Bill English as prime minister, with Ardern's ratings have ranging between 26.3 and 46 per cent. More specifically, support for English is concentrated amongst National's traditional supporters, those in business, farming and the higher professions. He also polls more strongly with men than women and with European (Pakeha) New Zealanders than Maori and Pasifika. English is much less popular with working-class, female and

young voters.

He is widely considered to be a sound economic manager and has presided over a programme of fiscal austerity. Critics assert he has maintained and extended the neoliberal policy regime that was rapidly and comprehensively implemented from 1984 to 1999, and that has been maintained by Labour and National governments since then. New Zealand is currently one of the more unequal countries in the OECD with respect to income distribution, and both homelessness and poverty have emerged as major social problems.

What kind of voting system does New Zealand have, and how does it function?

New Zealand has a mixed member proportional (MMP) electoral system. Voters have two votes: a party vote and an electorate vote. In order to win seats, parties must clear one of two thresholds: either they must win at least 5 per cent of the total votes cast in a general election or they must win at least one electoral seat. Any party that clears either of these two thresholds is entitled to a share of the 121 seats in the New Zealand parliament reflecting the proportion of the party votes it has won. In effect, the party vote determines how many additional list MPs each party will get into parliament to bring its share of seats into line with its share of the vote. Proportional representation has ensured the presence of a wider spectrum of parties within parliament since 1996 and thus has helped counter the depoliticisation of the political sphere.

What are the two biggest parties' headline policies? Which particular groups are they targeting?

National has tried to make tax, law and order, the need for more punitive sanctions on welfare beneficiaries, economic management and immigration central issues of the campaign. Labour's focus has been the housing crisis, investing in light rail in Auckland, a water tax to fund improvements in reducing pollution of waterways, child poverty, homelessness, more adequate funding of tertiary education and the public health system, and climate change.

Which other parties are standing candidates for election?

There are two minor parties that have maintained continuous parliamentary representation since 1999, and that in recent years have polled in the range of five to fifteen per cent. The Green Party of Aotearoa which, in common with other Green parties internationally, is committed to an agenda focused on social justice and environmental policy; and New Zealand First, which pursues a

nationalist agenda focused on limiting immigration and foreign ownership, promoting economic development within the provincial regions, and improving state support for the elderly. In essence, since the introduction of MMP in 1996, the Labour and National parties have remained dominant and the Green Party and New Zealand First have been the most important minor parties.

What impact would a Labour government have on relations with other countries in the Asia Pacific region?

The Labour and National parties share a strong commitment to free trade, and so an incoming Labour Government is unlikely to adopt a substantially different approach to pursuing and negotiating free trade agreements in the Asia Pacific region. A Labour Government would, however, adopt a more independent foreign policy stance in relation to the United States; is likely to be more active in supporting initiatives within the region to address issues such as climate change and rising sea levels; and will provide more aid to its smaller neighbours in the South Pacific.

Interview conducted by Ellie Mears.



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