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New Zealand politics moves from kindness to hostility

Election day is just around the corner in New Zealand, and in many ways, this general election could not be more different from the one in 2020

While the world is witnessing war, hostilities and geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, Ukraine and the Asia-Pacific region, New Zealanders are heading to the polls this weekend to elect a new Parliament. Their choice is a traditional one — between parties on the Left and the Right.

Early on in the campaign, it seemed as if many voters were disillusioned with the current majority Labour government, which had steered them safely through the Covid-19 pandemic but is struggling to reign in the cost of living. The centre-right opposition party 'National' is promising cuts to government spending, including the possibility of what might be labelled austerity measures, while also pledging tax cuts to alleviate voters' concerns. Although independent analysts and journalists have suggested that the party's math doesn't quite add up, National's support in the polls had been increasing. But the latest polls suggest that the election race could become a closer one than initially believed.

Dramatic changes

In many ways, New Zealand's 2023 general election could not be more different from the one in 2020. Jacinda Ardern is no longer the leader of the Labour Party, and the language of kindness, care, as well as messages of hope and inclusion, have disappeared with her. In their place, New Zealand has witnessed a resurgence of anti-Māori sentiment and extremist reactions to proposals such as co-governance of natural resources and infrastructure, and the reorganisation of the healthcare system that is more supportive of the needs of Māori communities. Indeed, the politicisation of race relations during this year's election campaign has reached a level not seen since the now-infamous 2004 'Orewa' speech given by former National leader Don Brash.

A recent poll indicates that most voters are concerned about the cost of living and inflation, law and order, and health.

With these reactions has come increased opposition to the contemporary and widely accepted recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi's significance in fostering strong partnerships between Māori and the Crown to ensure greater equity in policy outcomes. (The Treaty is a constitutional and culturally significant document, signed in 1840 between most Māori tribal leaders and representatives of the British Crown.)

While these perspectives are being primarily championed by smaller parties on the right, these are the parties likely to be needed as coalition partners if National is to form the next government. However, at this point, the deals these parties seek appear unpalatable to National. In response, the latter has threatened to call for a second election if an unstable coalition outcome based on non-negotiable bottom lines becomes the only possibility.

A close race

While these tactical manoeuvres of the right are being aired publicly by the political class and journalists, a recent IPSOS poll indicates most voters are instead primarily concerned about the cost of living, inflation, law and order, and health. Issues related to race relations are absent from the top five issues of concern.

Meanwhile, the two smaller parties on the left (the Greens and *Te Pāti Māori* – the Māori Party), actually continue to campaign on these top five issues. They have stayed positive in their messaging and are quietly garnering an increase in support. In fact, the most recent polls suggest that the Greens have reached a new high in terms of potential vote share at around 14 per cent, while *Te Pāti Māori* is likely to gain an additional seat. Although these two parties, together with Labour, are unlikely to secure 50 per cent of the seats, it appears that the election race has become a closer one, with the right no longer guaranteed the easy win suggested by the polls only a month ago.

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A matter of concern for the parties on the left is the expected voter turnout. It is not yet clear whether the populist, reactionary and negative campaigning, along with an increase in abusive threats directed at candidates across the political spectrum, will lead to a reduction in voter turnout. In New Zealand, the numbers for

advance voting (i.e. early voting before the elections) are lower when compared to 2020 but higher than in 2017. The former trend is not surprising for two reasons. First, during the 2020 election, New Zealanders were in the midst of Covid-19 restrictions. Because of the additional distancing measures put in place by the Electoral Commission, advance voting was considered a safer way to cast a vote than in person.

Second, unlike in 2020, no simultaneous headline referendums are being held this year. In the previous election, the passage of end-of-life legislation and the legalisation of cannabis were both put to a vote, with the latter believed to have particularly motivated younger voters. Findings from the 2020 New Zealand Election Study reveal that young people tended to be more likely than older age groups to have favoured legalisation, sought more information from the Electoral Commission's referendum website and were more likely, as a consequence, to be mobilised to vote. The absence of such referendums in this weekend's election, in combination with the prevalence of right-wing populist policy positions, may yet prove detrimental to the final turnout rates.

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It is also important to remember that the vote share for the Labour Party was bound to drop in 2023. New Zealand has a proportional representation system, where coalitions or support agreements are the norm. As such, the 2020 election outcome was an anomaly, as Labour had the numbers to form a government with an outright majority — something that hadn't occurred since the introduction of the mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral system in 1996 and, undoubtedly, was a result of the trust the electorate had in Ardern during Covid-19. Currently, the polls have Labour at around 30 per cent, and both they and the smaller parties to the left, may still see an increase from the special and overseas votes (a trend that has been evident in the past).

All in all, the two major parties are unlikely to reach anything close to 40 per cent, ensuring that both will be dependent on the smaller parties, most notably the socially conservative, anti-neoliberal, Māori led, Treaty-sceptic and populist New Zealand First party, known for dragging out

coalition negotiations.

By the time this article is published, the final leaders' debate will have taken place, and, perhaps, the undecided voters will now be ready to make their choice. The unexpected closeness of this election race might also incentivise higher turnout — as there is now a sense on both sides that every vote will indeed count. Nevertheless, no matter what happens in these final days, it seems unlikely that New Zealanders will see the formation of a government before the middle of November. In other words, the norms associated with New Zealand's MMP system have returned post-Covid.



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