



Voters' Veto







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The 2002 Election in New Zealand
and the Consolidation of Minority Government

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PREFACE

The title of this book sums up one of the main features of the 2002 election in New Zealand. Before the Prime Minister called the election, opinion polls had foreshadowed a possible outright win for Labour. Presented with the prospect of a majority government, a significant number of voters decided to withdraw their support from Labour, and therefore vetoed that option, robbing Labour of the chance to exercise ‘unbridled power’ (Palmer 1979). Following on from the previous Labour–Alliance government, which had lacked an overall majority in Parliament, after the election another Labour-led minority government found support on confidence and supply from an unexpected source, the United Future party.

Much about the 2002 election was unexpected, notably its timing, and several of its outcomes. The election was four months early, unusual in New Zealand political history. The Green party increased its support, but not by nearly as much as expected. The Greens remained offside with Labour over a key issue, policies toward genetic modification, and their support for a Labour-led government on other issues could no longer be assumed. Despite this, the centre-left virtually held its 1999 share of the vote, while losing a few seats. The Alliance, Labour’s coalition partner since the 1999 election, vanished from Parliament. Two former Alliance MPs remained under the banner of the Progressive Coalition, including the founder of the Alliance and former Deputy Prime Minister, Jim Anderton.

The biggest surprises came on the other side of the political fence. The centre-right vote dissolved into fragments. The National party had dominated New Zealand politics for the previous half-century. Now it fell to the lowest level ever polled by a major centre-right party in New Zealand’s electoral history. This was a result that reduced many commentators to stupefaction and perplexity. New Zealand First, quite recently discredited by its contribution to the collapse of New Zealand’s 1996–98 coalition government, made a strong recovery. Voters had either forgotten or forgiven. The most rightward-leaning party, ACT, maintained its vote, but compared to the previous election in 1999, centre-right support shifted to the centre, to United Future. This alliance of the small United party and a Christian-based party, Future New Zealand, appeared virtually out of nowhere to become a significant pivotal player. That National failed to rise when Labour fell contradicted expectations shaped by decades of

two-party politics. Had the emerging multi-party politics of proportional representation finally upset the electoral seesaw between the two traditional political adversaries?

Despite their greater distance from majority government than had been expected, Labour and the Progressive Coalition were in a position strong enough to play off United Future and the Greens against each other in post-election talks. United Future quickly agreed to provide support on questions of confidence and supply. Meanwhile, the Greens could be relied on to back most of the government's more left-leaning legislation when United Future might refuse to do so. A Scandinavian-style party system appeared to have emerged, with Labour in a strategically dominant position, at least for the time being, its electoral support exceeding that of the next largest party, National, by more than 20 per cent. Yet despite these significant changes in the fortunes of the parties, the turnout of voters on the day declined to a New Zealand low.

All this makes the 2002 election both a landmark and a puzzle. The campaign seemed even more volatile than that of 1996, the first New Zealand election under the mixed-member proportional (MMP) system of representation. What led to this volatility, and to these outcomes? What are the consequences of the election for the political process, and for New Zealanders' trust and confidence in it? Is minority government within a moderately fragmented party system the most likely pattern for the immediate future of New Zealand politics? Will voters continue to veto the prospect of one party claiming power for itself alone?

The New Zealand Election Study (NZES) provides the most comprehensive data with which to explore these questions, and a host of others. It obtains information from over 5,000 voters picked at random. Many are contacted twice, once during the campaign, and again after the election. Other participants in the 2002 study also participated in 1999 and 1996, allowing us to make more robust inferences about change. The NZES has also collected data from election candidates at each election since 1993. And for comparative purposes, we can draw on similar data from New Zealand elections since 1990, and from elections in many other countries from about the same time, as part of the participation of the NZES in an international research collaboration, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). For further details on the methodology of the 2002 NZES, see the Appendices.

In 2002, the NZES set as its key objective an assessment of the importance of public debate, public opinion, and knowledge about government: in particular, to examine the effectiveness of the election campaign as a means of mobilising and informing voters. To assist in this, we provide an analysis of the role of television during the campaign, and how it and other media may have shaped public perceptions and voting choices. Another key chapter focuses on the ability of parties to mobilise voters. Most of all, however, we provide an authoritative account of the 2002 election, and an assessment of the current health of New Zealand democracy.

In chapter 1, Peter Aimer provides background and a narrative of the key events leading up to the start of the campaign. He examines the poll trends, leadership preferences, and the effects of both subjective impressions and objective evidence about the state of the economy, a major reason for Labour's

continued status as the most popular party. The chapter explores the change of leadership in the National party, and the deteriorating relationship between Labour and the Greens because of disagreements on the issue of genetic modification. In chapter 2, Aimer is joined by Jack Vowles for an analysis of the main features of the 2002 election. The two authors examine the flows of votes, and the most significant shifts between parties. They compare vote volatility in 2002 with previous elections, and trace changes in levels of party identification. They provide a detailed analysis of split voting, and estimate the hypothetical vote had the election been held under the old first-past-the-post (FPP) system. They look in more detail at the shape of the party system and the left–right positioning of the parties. Voting is linked to social structure, age, and gender. This chapter also establishes the foundations of a model of overall vote choice for the 2002 election that is built on in chapters 8, 11, and 12.

In chapter 3, Jack Vowles outlines the campaign, examines its key trends, and seeks to answer several pertinent questions. What were the effects of the campaign? Why did Labour's support fall so far from the heights reached in earlier polls? Why did National fall so low? What events during the campaign, if any, were of pivotal importance? An analysis of issue and leadership effects in the campaign is based on a statistical model of vote intention changes during the campaign that is also drawn on in other chapters. In chapter 4, media expert Joe Atkinson draws on the beginnings of a major study of the media and the 2002 election that is supported by the Marsden Fund. He examines the style of journalistic coverage of the campaign, and looks in more detail at how key events were presented on television. He asks whether attention to particular media led voters toward or away from particular parties. In particular, what was the impact of TV3's controversial campaign coverage?

In chapter 5, the Canadian election experts André Blais, Peter Loewen, and Marc-André Bodet take a fresh look at the strategic issues posed during the campaign, and open up once again the question of how the change to MMP has influenced voting behaviour in New Zealand. Given the widespread expectation that Labour would govern, did centre-right voters seek the best way to keep the Greens out of government rather than voting sincerely? Does this explain the decline in National's vote? In chapter 6, Raymond Miller asks who stood for office, and why. Drawing on the candidate surveys that the NZES has included in its research design since 1993, he begins by outlining the reasons why people might choose to stand for election, then asks what changes have occurred under MMP, and with what consequences for the nature of political representation in New Zealand. In particular, contrasts in the roles of electorate and list MPs appear to be becoming more distinct.

In chapter 7, Jeffrey Karp and Susan Banducci compare party campaigning before and after the introduction of MMP. They examine how the change in the electoral system has influenced party strategies and their influences on voters. They address in particular the decline in turnout apparent in 1999 and again in 2002, and show how the ability of parties to contact and mobilise voters has steadily declined since 1993.

In chapter 8, Jack Vowles probes the political attitudes and opinions of voters and candidates. In particular, he asks to what extent political parties – as represented by their candidates – were 'in tune' with the views and

perspectives of their voters. In this sense, are parties 'responsible' to their voters, with policies that their voters support and expect to be carried out? He shows that the evidence for consistency is strongest over the long term. He asks: how strongly are attitudes and opinions held by voters; and are there patterns in those attitudes that define the foundations of political debate in New Zealand? The chapter concludes by estimating how much voters' attitudes and opinions help shape voting choice, over and above the effects of social structure that are demonstrated in chapter 2.

In chapter 9, Raymond Miller and Jeffrey Karp examine attitudes to coalition government, minority government and MMP. Using data from other countries with systems of proportional representation, they show how attitudes in New Zealand compare. In chapter 10, Susan Banducci and Jeffrey Karp take a much wider look at how trends apparent in New Zealand in 2002 may also be found in many if not most other democracies. These trends include the decline of parties, media-dominated campaigns, and an increased public disengagement from politics. They enter into an international debate about whether or not mixed electoral systems like MMP are 'the best of both worlds'. This chapter also draws on a very valuable dataset that includes election survey information from about 30 countries, to which the NZES has contributed some of its data. It shows that the level of satisfaction with the economy is an important influence on satisfaction with democracy, and with politicians.

In the next chapter, Jack Vowles and Peter Aimer continue the inquiry into these themes. How much has New Zealand recovered from the crisis of trust in politicians that reached its height in the early 1990s? They further explore trust in politicians, satisfaction with MPs, and the extent of contact between citizens and their representatives. The chapter concludes with an examination of the importance of party leadership, with a particular emphasis on the dominance of Helen Clark in leadership preferences. Finally, the conclusion provides a final model of voting choice, and estimates the extent to which voting choices were shaped by leadership, perceptions of the economy, local candidates, political trust, and remaining loyalties to political parties. It sums up the nature of the voters' veto – if indeed there was one.

Voters' Veto is the fifth in a series of books on New Zealand elections that have arisen from the NZES and been published by Auckland University Press since 1990. The first two books, *Voters' Vengeance* (Vowles and Aimer 1993) and *Towards Consensus?* (Vowles, Aimer, Catt, Lamare, Miller 1995) provide the benchmarks for understanding voting behaviour in New Zealand before the shift to MMP. The third, *Voters' Victory?* (Vowles, Aimer, Banducci, Karp 1998) – the question mark again needs emphasis – analysed the momentous first election under MMP, drawing on a number of contributors from outside New Zealand: in particular, from Canada, Australia, and the United States. The fourth, *Proportional Representation on Trial* (Vowles, Aimer, Karp, Banducci, Miller, Sullivan 2002), analysed the 1999 election and took the story up to the controversial Parliamentary Review of MMP in 2001. Meanwhile, two of the key participants, Jeffrey Karp and Susan Banducci, had moved to the Netherlands.

A study like the 2002 NZES incurs many debts and dues. We can only mention some, but our thanks go to all who have helped in various ways.

Elizabeth Caffin of Auckland University Press, and her team — Amy Tansell, Katrina Duncan, Annie Irving, and Christine O’Brien — helped make it possible to publish this book, and create the ‘five-in-a-row’ series. In a small country like New Zealand, people are more likely to be asked to participate in surveys and market research than in countries with larger populations. The expansion of telephone marketing further adds to the burden. Given this, our greatest thanks must be to those who responded to our questions, many more than once. The research is simply not possible without them, and our appreciation of their contribution is immense. The early timing of the election, moreover, caused considerable problems. At short notice, the market research firm ACNielsen (NZ) Ltd. made room in its fieldwork schedule for our demanding five-week, seven-days-a-week, rolling cross-section survey. Robin Ransom and Brian Turner deserve particular thanks. Mailshop were the sub-contractors for questionnaire printing, mailout, receipt of questionnaires, and data capture, and we thank Gena Clements in particular for her help in sorting out most of the inevitable problems that came with the need to organise in three weeks what we had hitherto anticipated we would arrange over three or four months. John Stephenson was responsible for a large part of the data preparation, a complex task given the range of subsamples and samples that form part of the study. We thank André Blais for his assistance and support for expanding the range of our analysis of strategic voting, and for his consequent participation in the 2002 Study and in this book along with his colleagues at the University of Montreal. The University of Amsterdam, and more recently the University of Twente, made it possible for Susan Banducci and Jeffrey Karp to continue their involvement in the NZES. Particular thanks are due to Jacques Thomassen. The Electoral Enrolment Centre delivered the electoral rolls for sampling with their usual speed and efficiency. At the Electoral Commission, Paul Harris’s speedy responses to our requests for information have been much appreciated. We thank David Parrish for efficiently carrying out the vote validation process, and the various Electoral Offices around the country for helping him do so. Edwin de Ronde came on board through the Marsden-funded media study and provided useful assistance towards the end. The University of Auckland Research Office, along with Jack Vowles, managed the financial rearrangements entailed by the shift of the NZES fully to Auckland in 2002. We thank the University of Waikato for making the transition as easy as it could have been from their end and for their support for the NZES between 1996 and 2001.

All the stages of the NZES have been funded by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FRST) or, for 1990, its predecessor, the Social Sciences Research Fund Committee. We acknowledge and thank FRST for its support over those years. Vowles, Aimer and Miller, those named in the 2002 Election Study contract, express particular thanks. However, for the next New Zealand election, the NZES faces a new challenge, as despite a strong track record of innovative research and publication, wide public interest — particularly in our campaign polling — and a well-justified request for further support, our proposal to continue the NZES with further FRST funding was rejected. There will be another New Zealand Election Study, but those involved are currently engaged in seeking out new sources of funding and, perhaps,

delivery. Our research monitors the state of New Zealand democracy and provides a means for ongoing inquiry about the relations between New Zealanders and their government. We think it is too important to simply let it lapse.

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and Raymond Miller
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