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NEW ZEALAND POPULISM IN THE 2017 ELECTION AND BEYOND

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Just over 50 years ago, in 1969, the movement to Halt All Racist Tours (HART) was formed to protest and prevent rugby sporting tours to apartheid South Africa. HART coordinated the activities of anti-racist groups, unions, churches and university students. Most of its members were of the generation that has become known as ‘baby boomers’. They were passionate regarding human rights in South Africa and were becoming increasingly aware of unresolved questions regarding the state and status of Māori at home. Their cause, and the protest action that resulted, helped to persuade Labour Prime Minister Norman Kirk to cancel the 1973 All Black rugby tour of South Africa.

This clash of politics and sport divided New Zealanders and, in 1975, authoritarian populist National party leader Robert Muldoon harnessed a cultural backlash in his bid to become prime minister. He referred to the protesters as ‘disruptive, anti-establishment, anti-government, anti-everything that we stand for’ (cited in Field, 2010). Once elected, Muldoon wholeheartedly endorsed continued sporting contacts with South Africa, ignoring growing international opposition to New Zealand’s position and the Gleneagles agreement that had been signed by 26 Commonwealth Heads of State. Muldoon’s use of sport as a political instrument to mobilise support for his government continued throughout his nine years in office.

This vignette is a reminder that New Zealand is not immune to authoritarian populism—to the sight of political leaders leveraging anti-elitist, anti-internationalist sentiments, demanding loyalty and being prepared to use the police and security services to repel public protest. As one HART leader has argued, ‘the country was Muldoon’s playground ... he was Trump before Trump’ (Wickham, 2019).

As we suggested in our introductory chapter, this experience may have inoculated New Zealand against the authoritarian populist politics witnessed elsewhere over the last decade or more. Winston Peters, leader of New Zealand First, was a member of parliament in the Muldoon government between 1979 and 1981. Peters is on record as not supporting government action to cancel the 1981 Springbok tour, although he made a personal decision not to attend any games (Neas, 2012). Scholars internationally position his party as right-wing populist; however, this oversimplifies New Zealand’s contemporary political landscape. Rather, as the chapters in this volume reveal, populism in New Zealand is best viewed as moderate, majoritarian and mainstream (see Chapter 1). Peters and his party combine populism and pluralism. As Peters himself has explained, ‘one of the great principles of democratic government is protection of the minority. That’s fundamental. That is a critical issue’ (cited in Neas, 2012). At times, the discourses employed by New Zealand politicians and parties have been exclusionary; however, at other times, leaders such as Jacinda Ardern have invoked an inclusive notion of the ‘people’ (see Chapter 6). Anti-pluralist populism, where it exists, is expressed in some prejudice against immigrants; however, it has adopted a more subtle form of exclusion when facing the indigenous minority within ‘the people’ by failing to accept Māori rights as a Treaty partner (Chapter 7).

Party discourse during the 2017 election campaign was anti-immigration rather than anti-immigrant. As Chapter 5 has demonstrated, those voters who were concerned regarding net migration were most likely to choose New Zealand First. While Labour also committed to reducing levels of immigration, their proposed cuts in numbers were lower than those of New Zealand First and were framed in terms of the need to reduce pressure on infrastructure, social services and housing. More generally, our results have demonstrated that concern regarding immigration is low and there is little evidence of a cultural backlash by social conservatives against social liberals (see Chapter 2). As Kate McMillan and Matthew Gibbons demonstrated, populism did feed a desire to reduce immigration but explained very little of that preference. Half of the populist effect occurred through prejudice

against immigrants; however, the other half was channelled through support for unions, the need for income redistribution and greater availability of housing—economic and social inequities partly generated by historically high immigration levels. Meanwhile, authoritarian attitudes did not affect immigration policy in any way. Anti-immigrant prejudice had direct effects, though not necessarily functioning via populism, as did preferences for cultural conformity. At various times over the course of Labour's time in opposition, while commentators had been keen to claim Labour was at electoral risk by associating itself too closely with 'identity politics', our analysis of voters' opinions suggests otherwise. The economy, housing, health and inequality were the issues that mattered in 2014 (Vowles, Coffé & Curtin, 2017) and these were again important in 2017.

Nor has New Zealand been witnessing declining levels of political trust, which are often deemed to be a core element in the rise of populist parties. As discussed in Chapter 4, democratic satisfaction has remained steady at approximately 65 per cent—which, while not outstanding in comparison to most Scandinavian countries, is somewhat better than average among developed democracies. Further, while there has been a long-term trend of decreasing turnout, somewhat more among younger generations (and within this group, among younger men), turnout marginally increased both at the 2014 and 2017 elections, albeit from a historical low point.

We have provided a theoretical and empirical critique of the theory and the literature that have too widely stretched the concept of populism. The concept of populism has been applied to parties that entrench, rather than challenge, the power of elites by dividing rather than uniting the public. Nothing could be further from the intentions of traditional and contemporary populists, who seek to unite an overwhelming majority. We concede that many parties of the authoritarian right use populist discourse and framing. However, this does not necessarily make them populist in their objectives or ideology. We define populism as a normative democratic theory, in opposition to an elitist or liberal theory of democracy. Populist rhetoric provides a frame that all political actors may use from time to time; however, this does not make them populist. Our sense of what lies behind the current critique of populism leads us to speculate (if not conclude) that, because elitist democratic theory denies the possibility and legitimacy of majoritarian democracy, it provides the key normative foundation of 'anti-populism'. As argued in Chapter 1, this anti-populism concedes too much normative territory to those it seeks to oppose. We

define populism as a continuum of norms and discourses, of more or less populism, rather than categorising parties or attitudes in terms of their fit to an ideal-typical definition. Distinguishing between exclusionary and inclusive forms of populism has more analytical veracity. Exclusionary forms are associated with authoritarianism and anti-pluralism; however, in contrast to most of the literature, we argue that inclusive forms of populism are consistent with the acceptance of pluralism. Exclusionary forms use populist rhetoric but fail to measure up to the goals of traditional populism in their restrictive notions of 'the people'. Historically, New Zealand exhibits examples both of authoritarian, exclusionary populism and its inclusionary alternative.

As mentioned above, the National Party government of Robert Muldoon (1975–1984) constituted the country's closest meeting with authoritarian populism. By contrast, prime ministers Seddon, Savage and Kirk embodied a 'heresthetic' or strategic leadership style to advance an inclusive populist approach that sought to invoke a wider understanding of who constituted the 'people'. In Chapter 6, Jennifer Curtin and Lara Greaves analysed Ardern's version of inclusive rhetoric being 'kindness', 'hope' and optimism', and the extent to which this resonated with voters. Certainly, support for Labour among women voters increased significantly with Ardern as leader compared to recent past elections. Ardern's explicitly feminist leanings did not lead to a cultural backlash. She was popular with populists, both men and women; however, authoritarians were stubbornly resistant to Ardern's inclusive messages.

Thus, while authoritarian populism might be on the rise globally, there is little to suggest that an upsurge occurred in New Zealand in 2017. Jacinda Ardern's ascension aside, the issues that mattered most to voters represented 'politics as normal'. Material wellbeing—the economy, health and housing—concerned voters from both the left and the right. Inequality and poverty were not far behind. Ardern referred to climate change as New Zealand's 'nuclear-free moment' and New Zealanders rated the environment as highly as immigration among their issues of concern. Although the Key and English governments were deemed to be competent economic managers in the wake of the global financial crisis, they were increasingly subject to a narrative of years of neglect under National's 'austerity-lite' policies. Yet, New Zealand's politics were stable. The moderate multi-party system showed little sign of fragmentation. Votes shifted more in 2017 than at the two previous elections but there were no strong signs of dealignment or realignment. The dominant

cleavage remained that of urban versus rural, and political choices between the left and right continued in predictable fashion. The 2017 election demonstrated that there was little appetite for a populist revolution.

Our book operationalised populism in two forms: at the level of discourse and rhetoric and as an underlying dimension in public attitudes. We first analysed populist attitudes by way of the instruments provided by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) (Module 5) and included in the 2017 New Zealand Election Study (NZES). We identified several problems with those instruments. Following Norris and Inglehart (2019), to assist in making the distinction between exclusionary and inclusionary populism, a separation between populist and authoritarian attitudes was required. The CSES questions generated five dimensions, rather than the expected three. The two additional dimensions were (1) associated with questions often used to measure external political efficacy (antipathy to elites) and (2) seemingly measuring majoritarianism (attitudes to representative democracy). Attitudes to out-groups formed the third underlying factor expected in the CSES framework; however, in the New Zealand context, this dimension split into three: anti-immigrant attitudes, in-group exclusivity or ‘nativism’, and cultural conformity. As New Zealand society comprises a significant indigenous minority, followed by successive waves of immigrants—at first predominantly European, but more recently diverse—this separation was not unexpected.

By retaining some but dropping other CSES instruments, and adding appropriate questions from the NZES, Greaves and Vowles constructed more theoretically appropriate populist and authoritarian scales. However, both may be subject to criticism. Estimates of authoritarian attitudes vary considerably; further, our mix of instruments, while acceptable, is not ideal. The populist scale still contains items usually associated with estimating external political efficacy. However, an independent estimate of external efficacy could also be drawn from other items in the dataset to provide a corrective. Exploring the correlates of populism and authoritarianism in social structure, demographics and among generational cohorts, we found that populists tend to be younger (except for the youngest generation defined), Māori and Pasifika, and are more likely to have no assets, low incomes and lower education. Authoritarians tend to be older, male, from Pasifika and Asian communities, religious and to be less educated.

Identification of populist rhetoric in party discourses finds, as expected, that New Zealand First provides the most examples. However, this has varied over time, reaching a peak in 2011, after a period during which New Zealand First had been excluded from parliament and sought successfully to return. In 2017, populist signifiers could be found in other party platforms. In New Zealand, populists tend to the left, authoritarians to the right, both in terms of left–right orientations and in party choice. New Zealand First voters are alone in tending both towards populism and authoritarianism, confirming that, in the eyes of many of its voters, New Zealand First is a party, like its leader, in the Muldoon tradition. It was possible that Labour and left populism might be shaped by low efficacy, resulting from the party's several years in opposition. Even after controlling for efficacy, once they knew their party was in government, Labour voters became only marginally less populist, while the strength of the association remained.

Populist and authoritarian attitudes partly shape satisfaction and support for democracy. Because they have greater expectations than non-populists that governments should be responsive to majority opinion, populists tend to be much less satisfied with democracy than non-populists. They show a slight tendency to become less supportive of democracy as populist attitudes grow stronger. Authoritarians are marginally less satisfied with democracy; however, authoritarianism does not play into lack of support for democracy. These are unexpected findings. An explanation may lie in New Zealand's simple unitary state that concentrates political authority in central government—the lack of fundamental constitutional law and, thus, the existence of near-absolute parliamentary supremacy and a consequently powerful executive. This provides political elites with the opportunity to exert the strong leadership valued by authoritarians; however, such strong leadership may not always accord with majority opinion, leading populists to be less satisfied and more critical. Chapter 4 also addressed claims that younger generations have become less supportive of democracy. Comparing the same age cohorts in 2002 and 2017, it seems more likely that these age differences are the result of life cycle rather than generational effects—as people age, they become more supportive of democracy.

After the 2017 election, a legitimacy crisis was possible, following the exclusion from government of the party that won the vote plurality. NZES data throw this into an even harsher light by finding that, when asked to choose between National- and Labour-led governments, people

somewhat preferred National over Labour. If anything, New Zealand First voters and non-voters leaned towards National; however, they became less likely to do so after government formation, suggesting some cueing both from the election result (earlier) and government formation (later). New Zealanders marginally favoured National due to its reputation for more competent leadership and stewardship over the economy, although the economic gloss had waned somewhat when compared to the previous election. However, on matters of policy preferences, voters also marginally tended towards Labour and centre-left positions. When comparing the left–right policy positions of the various parties, as perceived by voters themselves and weighted by the vote shares of the actual and hypothetical coalitions of the available and feasible options, the coalition that formed was the one closest to the median voter.

The government outcome marginally depressed satisfaction with democracy and support for coalitions among National voters. More broadly, though, support for the principle and practice of coalition government was strongest among populists and weakest among authoritarians—the latter was expected but the former less so, at least from the standpoint of populist scholarship outside New Zealand. However, this is consistent with strong populist elements in the campaign for proportional representation and continued perceptions among New Zealanders that multi-party government is more responsive to majority public opinion than single-party government. Given this, expectations that New Zealand populism should be anti-pluralist, in this sense at least, are not borne out by the evidence.

The presence of a significant indigenous minority complicates the picture in a society originally based on colonial settlement, particularly given that Māori have their own segment of the electoral system, in the form of the Māori seats. Lara Greaves and Janine Hayward confirmed a series of previous findings showing that, while turning out to vote less than Pākehā, Māori tend to take part in more active forms of participation than other ethnic groups (Chapter 7). Greaves and Hayward broke new ground by finding a relatively high level of populism among Māori and suggested two explanations. Historically marginalised and denied their rights for over a century of colonisation, Māori have low levels of trust in Pākehā-dominated governments and low expectations that governments will respond to their needs. Therefore, it is not surprising that they score high

on anti-elitism. Conversely, populism is strongest among Māori on the Māori roll, indicating that this group may perceive the Māori electorates as a means by which they can express their preferences as a people.

Across the entire voting population, support or opposition to the Māori electorates plays strongly into a potentially deep cleavage in New Zealand politics—the extent to which the Māori self-determination promised in the Treaty can be accommodated within the political process. Greaves and Hayward tracked opinion among Māori and non-Māori over time, concluding that a referendum on the Māori seats, were it ever to be held, might affirm rather than reject them. Populism among Māori strongly affects their support for the Māori electorates. When partitioning out Pākehā, populism evidences no relationship with opinion about the Māori electorates—the main source of opposition is authoritarianism. Pākehā populists may turn in either direction. Some presumably respect the democratic choice of Māori to maintain their own means of representation, whereas others may regard dedicated Māori representation as either no longer needed or against principles of liberal individualism that focus on equal citizenship. A belief in a New Zealand identity based on birth and ancestry has no significant relationship with opinion about the Māori seats among Pākehā; if anything, this makes support for the Māori electorates slightly stronger. Meanwhile, ‘nativism’, in this sense, strongly affects Māori support for their electorates.

Our analysis uncovers the nature of populism in New Zealand in the early 21st century. It aligns to the left rather than the right and is dissatisfied with the current performance of representative democracy. A marginal populist tilt towards giving up on democracy entirely is accounted for by younger populists, who tend to become more supportive of democracy as they grow older. Populism has no relationship to attitudes regarding indigenous Māori rights and, indeed, Māori tend to be slightly more populist than other ethnic groups. Populism only marginally shapes the attitudes people hold about immigration; concern regarding the social and economic consequences of high rates of new arrivals is the more important factor. While the history of New Zealand contains evidence of authoritarian populism, populism (as it exists in public opinion in the early 21st century) prefers multi-party over single-party government, showing little evidence of anti-pluralism. Jacinda Ardern’s leadership style is inclusive but only marginally populist. She has stronger support among populists than non-populists; however, this is mainly accounted for by higher levels of populism among the demographic groups that

favour Labour. The New Zealand First party does attract support from authoritarian populists but its vote share remains relatively low. Its role as a government coalition partner since 2017 could be the subject of a book in its own right; however, most commentators would concede that it has acted more as a block against left-leaning policy than as a promoter of its conservative values.

Where to in 2020?

In 2017, when Winston Peters announced he would support Labour in forming a coalition government, he asserted that there was need for capitalism to become more humane and responsible. Peters has described neoliberalism as ‘a failed experiment’ (Moir, 2017). Jacinda Ardern campaigned on the need for politics and policy to be kinder and caring regarding all New Zealanders, particularly those in poverty. Consequently, New Zealand has witnessed an incremental shift in the way budgets are delivered, with a focus on wellbeing, and the way policy is delivered, with a focus on reducing child poverty. While transformation was promised on issues such as climate change, housing affordability, mental health and inequality, progress has been measured, in part due to two factors: the realities of the need for consensus building when in coalition government and the Labour government’s desire to demonstrate their capability and expertise in managing the economy. In fiscal terms, since 2016, New Zealand has retained a relatively strong position, with healthy government budget surpluses and relatively low government debt (New Zealand Treasury, 2019; Trading Economics, 2019). Exports have grown (Statistics New Zealand, 2019a) and the unemployment rate as of November 2019 was 4.3 per cent (Statistics New Zealand, 2019b).

As 2019 wore on, there was increasing scepticism that this would be the government’s ‘year of delivery’. In the 2019 Mood of the Boardroom survey, Jacinda Ardern’s level of competence was ranked only fifth in her Cabinet and the government was accused of ‘failing to execute its policies in a timely manner’ (Parker, 2019). Quarterly business surveys reported low levels of confidence in the economy, but with signs of an upturn at the end of 2019, although the October 2019 survey reported a level of gloom not experienced since 2009. While inconsistent with the data available on current conditions, these perceptions were partly rooted in expectations and possible behaviour shaped by clouds on the international horizon

and also by uncertainty regarding government policy (Flaws, 2019). Consequently, economists and commentators expected the Reserve Bank of New Zealand to drop the official cash rate affecting interest rates from 1 to 0.5 per cent in November 2019. However, it did not, suggesting a degree of scepticism regarding the extent of the pessimism. All else equal, including the ‘objective economy’, business confidence tends to be lower under Labour than National governments, indicating the political bias of businesses (Hickey, 2017). Business pessimism regarding their own immediate futures is more telling but may still be overstated.

Early in 2020, as Figure 9.1 shows, opinion polling indicated that the margin between vote intentions for the two main parties was continuing to wax and wane. Labour’s apparent defeat at the 2017 election drove down its polling immediately after; however, following the announcement that it would lead the government on 17 October, Labour rose to 40 per cent—three points above its election vote—and has remained at or above that level since. Meanwhile, despite its consignment to opposition, post-election vote intentions for the National Party remained firm. There were signs of National decline, combined with a Labour surge on the back of Jacinda Ardern’s powerful, empathetic and inclusive response to the Christchurch terror attack on Islamic worshippers in March 2019. However, this trend was arrested in mid-2019 and National’s support remained firm until April 2020. Since 2017, while National has outpolled Labour over a longer period than Labour over National, intentions to vote for the Green Party have usually remained above the 5 per cent threshold. The crucial margin is between Labour/Green and National—this moves back and forth. Early 2020 polling displayed either a tight race or a wider National margin over Labour/Green, depending on polling organisation.¹ To the disgust of Winston Peters, who regularly chastises pollsters, New Zealand First has fared less well, usually sitting just below the threshold—albeit at a somewhat higher level than at the same stage in previous years (Miller & Curtin, 2011).

1 By early 2018, regular publicly released political polling in New Zealand had shrunk to being from only two organisations: Reid Research, who poll for TV3, and Colmar-Brunton, who poll for One News. YouGov entered the field in November 2019, polling for the Stuff/Fairfax media. Polling over the same periods, there are significant differences, with Colmar-Brunton tending to give higher estimates to National, and lower to Labour, and Reid Research and YouGov reporting tighter margins between the two major parties.

This situation facilitates a National Party strategy to keep New Zealand First vote intentions down by appealing to its potential voters who lean towards authoritarian populism—an attempt to rekindle the old Muldoon constituency for National. National also hopes that the Green Party will fall below the 5 per cent party vote threshold for representation in 2020 and has encouraged the development of an apparently centrist alternative green party, Sustainable New Zealand, hoping it will attract enough votes to push the Green Party below the threshold. However, this party has been slow in development and shows little sign of support. Meanwhile, in government, the Green Party has, in the words of its male co-leader, James Shaw, been obliged to ‘swallow some dead rats’. The Greens have given ground on a number of policy issues, including to take an incremental approach to including methane emissions in their signature Zero Carbon Bill. As a result, the party has faced criticism from its left regarding succumbing to excessive moderation (Trevett, 2018). In the early months of 2020, Green Party polling was tracking only just above the 5 per cent threshold.

Figure 9.1: Public opinion polling and party vote intentions (2017–2020).

Source: Cooke (2019); Curia (2019a–c). Includes Colmar Brunton, Reid Research, Roy Morgan (ceased in November 2017) and YouGov polls (one poll so far from 7–11 November 2019).

Figure 9.2: Public opinion polling regarding preferred prime minister (2017–2019).

Source: Curia (2019a–c).

Figure 9.2 also tracks the polling for preferred prime minister, beginning when Bill English took over the leadership of the National Party and position of prime minister. Ardern may be internationally popular; however, her popularity among New Zealand voters has waxed and waned. Before she became Labour leader, as Curtin and Greaves have reported, Ardern was already registering as preferred prime minister, at a popularity level almost as high as then Labour Party leader Andrew Little. On taking the Labour leadership on 1 August 2017, Ardern rivalled and, at times, exceeded English's popularity (see Chapter 6). Simon Bridges, who succeeded English as National Party leader following the election, has failed to make a significant mark. Winston Peters continues to register at a low level of preference that closely matches that of his party. Since the 2017 election, Ardern's preferred prime minister average is approximately 41 per cent. By contrast, over his first term of government (2008–2011), former National Party prime minister John Key averaged 51 per cent. Ardern has been a powerful force behind Labour's resurgence since 2017; however, John Key provided an even stronger foundation for National Party success between 2008 and 2016. Indeed, his legacy may underpin National's continued high polling. Early in 2020, preferences for Ardern

as preferred prime minister were tracking upward again. Less steeply, and at a much lower level, Opposition leader Simon Bridges was also making some headway.

The government faced criticism, not only from the expected directions but also from its own supporters and sympathetic commentators. At the end of 2019, expectations of rough economic weather may have been pessimistic; however, there was enough international uncertainty to cause concern. Until December, the government had been continuing to cleave to fiscal policy objectives set by the Labour and Green parties, which promise budget surpluses over a five-year economic cycle, government core spending at no more than 30 per cent of GDP and government debt at or below 20 per cent. Many economists, including those unsympathetic to the government, were calling for a fiscal stimulus, taking advantage of very low interest rates for sovereign debt. In early December, Finance Minister Grant Robertson at last began to follow that advice, announcing a NZ\$12 million boost in infrastructure expenditure (Daalder & Sachdeva, 2019).

Meanwhile, key government policies promising affordable housing for first home buyers and a light rail network for Auckland have failed to meet their objectives or have been delayed. The government commissioned a review on a Capital Gains Tax but, lacking support from New Zealand First, backed away from its recommendations, entirely removing the proposal from the political agenda. A new legislative and regulatory framework to address climate change was a key objective signalled by Ardern following becoming Labour Party leader. The Zero Carbon Bill was passed in November 2019 with the support of all but one minor political party, but required considerable compromise to gain such broad approval, including a further postponement for its application to farmers. Strong support for Labour among Māori has been challenged by a stand-off over ownership of former Māori land at Ihumātao, near Auckland International Airport. The land was confiscated following the New Zealand Wars of the 1860s and has significant archaeological and heritage value.

However, there have been some significant wins. The government has achieved a marginal reduction of prisoner numbers; however, the problems underlying high rates of imprisonment are not amenable to a 'quick fix'. Restoring prisoners' voting rights has been the subject of recent debate in the wake of a Waitangi Tribunal Report that ruled that the relevant provision in the *Electoral Act* is inconsistent with the Treaty of Waitangi. After much political wrangling the government was able to pass legislation to partially remove a blanket ban on prisoner voting rights. State and

social housing construction have significantly increased but provision remains well below demand. Mental health has received a huge boost in funding. Some punitive aspects of social welfare benefits administration have been relaxed, but many recommendations from a Welfare Advisory Group report released in March 2019 have yet to be addressed, despite the Prime Minister also being the Minister for Child Poverty Reduction.

Thus, although Labour's campaign messaging under Ardern during the 2017 election was one of hope and transformation, at the beginning of 2020 there was some dissatisfaction with the pace of change. It seemed that the 2020 election campaign would look considerably different to that of 2017. Ardern's popularity on the international stage is recognised as valuable by some and inconsequential by others. She was more experienced but less exciting, until the advent of COVID-19. Labour will need to run on its 'record', which, as briefly outlined above, has been inconsistent in its successes. Meanwhile, various scandals have beset New Zealand First, putting it at risk in terms of reaching the 5 per cent threshold. Therefore, it is likely to be a tough and bruising campaign.

There is early evidence to suggest that the National Party may choose a similar strategy to that of Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, whose success was underpinned by a range of negative campaigning through both social and traditional media (Gauja, Sawyer & Simms, 2020). Law and order and a return to hard-line policies on welfare beneficiaries will form strong National Party policies and talking points. National will target New Zealand First voters, perhaps mobilising populist rhetoric to do so. If New Zealand First were to fail to win seats, as National hopes, continued Green Party representation could be enough to return a Labour-led government that would be far less constrained in its ability to deliver policies on which both parties agree.

All of the above discussion assumes 'normal politics'. As elsewhere, by March 2020 it was becoming clear that the emergence of the COVID-19 virus would present a serious 'shock' to New Zealand's society, economy and politics. Likely recession makes the task of re-election more difficult, but if Labour and its government partners continue to handle the crisis well, they could maintain or even gain ground, much as the Key National government did in the aftermath of the major earthquake that hit Christchurch in 2011 (at much the same time in the electoral cycle). As at April 2020, the Ardern-led government response to the COVID-19 crisis comprised a four-week national lockdown, border closures and considerable additional expenditure to support wage subsidies, beneficiaries

and businesses. Voters' initial response to these drastic measures was very positive—the measures were exceptionally well received, with 83 per cent approval (Brain, 2020). Labour is likely to receive an electoral boost due to effective crisis management. However, National may have an advantage, due to its reputation as a sound economic manager that may be better able to bring the country out of recession (Curtin, 2020). The outcome of the 2020 election already appeared unclear at the end of 2019—it has now become even more difficult to predict.

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