

New Zealand votes for conservatism and the status quo

Written by Grant Duncan, Associate Professor for the School of People, Environment and Planning, Massey University



Bill English addresses supporters at the National Party election night event. AAP, [CC BY-ND](#)

After a dramatic election campaign that looked promising for the centre-left, New Zealand's voters have opted instead for conservatism.

Special votes are yet to be counted, and coalition negotiations yet to commence. But New Zealanders have opened the way for the centre-right National Party's fourth consecutive term in office. National's [provisional election night result](#) of 46% is only slightly down from its 47% in 2014.

Incumbent English to start coalition talks

The incumbent prime minister, Bill English, was jubilant on election night. His [speech](#) was as close as he could get to a victory speech. English said:

We will begin discussions with New Zealand First in finding common ground and most importantly forming the kind of government that will allow New Zealand to get on with the success.

NZ First won 7.5% of the votes and now holds the balance of power.

Two of the minor parties that had formerly supported the National-led government on confidence and supply, the United Future and Maori parties, failed to gain any seats. And the ACT Party, which supports National, was returned with one electorate seat only.

The leader of the largest opposition party, [Labour's Jacinda Ardern](#), did not concede defeat on election night, but her chances of forming a government with the centrist NZ First

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Party and the Greens are much slimmer. The combined seats of those three parties give a majority of only one.

Once special votes are counted, the final official tallies may take a seat away from National and see the Greens gain one, but that will not substantially alter the outcome.

Ardern lifts Labour from doldrums

Nonetheless, Ardern can claim a victory of sorts, as she has steered her party out of the doldrums, from 25% in the 2014 election to 35.8% this time.

The “[Jacinda effect](#)” was the dominant theme of the election campaign, drawing considerable international attention.

Read more: [New Zealand general election will always belong to Jacinda Ardern](#)

She was chosen to lead the Labour Party just seven weeks before the election, when Labour was declining in opinion polls. She drew an enthusiastic following and dramatically boosted her party’s polling, but not enough to claim victory on the night.

National’s attacks on [Labour’s fiscal and taxation plans](#) seem to have worked, even though they resorted to misrepresentation. A clever reframing of Labour’s slogan “Let’s do this!” to “Let’s tax this!” seems to have done the trick, dissuading enough potential swing voters.

On the day before polling day, rolling averages of public opinion polls showed National was likely to lead the next government, at around 44.5%. Labour had forged ahead of National in some earlier opinion polls, but was down to 37.7%.

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So, the election night result was better for National than polls had been predicting. Polling companies will be asking why their pre-electoral surveys tended to favour Labour, compared with election results.

New Zealanders play it safe

New Zealanders have gone for the safe and conservative option. English is a practising Catholic and father of six. His leadership style is uncharismatic, but steady. He lacks the personal popularity and charm of his predecessor, John Key, who handed over the reins of power to English [in December 2016](#) .

English will take this election result as a mandate for his party's programme. It is not clear yet, however, what policy or office-holding concessions he will have to make to Winston Peters, the veteran leader of NZ First. If English has to sack some of his own party colleagues from the cabinet in order to accommodate NZ First, it is bound to cause internal resentment.

A key question for many western democracies has been "Why is the Left losing?". Ardern was seen as the "[brightest hope for the centre-Left](#)".

Labour's rise has been partly at the expense of the Greens, who have fallen from 10.7% in 2014 to 5.9% this time – although special votes will probably give the Greens a boost. The combined Labour–Green vote of 41.7% is well short of National's 46%.

Although the National Party, after nine years in office, was vulnerable to attacks over problems in housing, health, education and the environment, this has not sufficed to cause a significant swing for change.

Centre of NZ politics shifts left

Instead of precipitating party-political fragmentation, this election has shifted back toward two-party politics. Both the Greens and NZ First have declined in support. The total National-plus-Labour party vote of 81.8% is the highest it has been under the proportional representation system in place since 1996.

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Since 2008, the National-led government avoided austerity policies, and gradually (almost imperceptibly) shuffled to the left, dealing reluctantly with issues that were normally on Labour's territory. The centre of New Zealand politics has shifted leftwards, with a greater acceptance of the role of the state. The free-market fundamentalism of the radical neoliberal years of 1984–96 is now on the fringes.

Nonetheless, inequality and poverty are persistent problems, and New Zealanders are well aware of this. Labour has been unable to take advantage of these significant social issues and to convince enough voters to back their messages about hope and change.

Grant Duncan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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