



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# New Zealand: 2020 general election

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## Summary

New Zealand held a General Election on Saturday 17 October 2020, with advance voting beginning two weeks earlier, on 3 October. Originally planned for 19 September, the election was postponed due to Covid-19.

As well as electing Members of Parliament, New Zealand's electorate voted on two referendums: one to decriminalise the recreational use of marijuana; the other to allow some terminally ill people to request assisted dying.

The election was commonly dubbed the "Covid election", with the coronavirus pandemic the main issue for voters throughout the campaign. Jacinda Ardern, the incumbent Prime Minister from the Labour Party, had been widely praised for her handling of the pandemic and the "hard and early" plan introduced by her Government in the early stages. She led in the polls throughout the campaign.

Preliminary results from the election show Ms Ardern won a landslide victory, securing 49.1 per cent of the votes and a projected 64 seats in the new (53rd) Parliament: a rare outright parliamentary majority.

The final tally will be revealed on 6 November, once overseas and special votes have been counted.

# 1. Background

General elections in New Zealand usually take place every three years and those eligible to vote must be aged 18 or older, New Zealand citizens or permanent residents, and have lived in New Zealand continuously for 12 months or more at some time in their life.<sup>1</sup>

Since 1996 New Zealand has used a voting system known as Mixed Member Proportional representation (MMP). This MMP system was introduced following a referendum in 1993.

Under MMP, 120 MPs are elected to Parliament: 72 are elected by just the voters in individual electorates around the country; and 48 are from political party lists (elected by all voters in New Zealand). It is a proportional system, which means that the proportion of votes a political party gets reflects the number of seats it has in Parliament.<sup>2</sup>

Seats decided by the party vote use the Webster/Sainte-Laguë proportionality method<sup>3</sup> and, under this proportionality method, a party must receive more than five per cent of the party vote or win an electorate seat to enter Parliament.

Of the 72 MPs voted to represent individual electorates, seven seats are reserved for Māori candidates, with the remaining 65 being general electorate seats.

Since MMP was introduced, no party has won an outright majority of seats in Parliament and the party with the most seats generally forms a government in coalition with other parties

Unusually, following the last general election in 2017, Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party formed a minority government in a formal coalition with the New Zealand First Party and with a confidence and supply agreement with the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand.

The 2020 General Election was called on 28 January 2020, with Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announcing the country would go to the polls on 19 September. However, on 17 August, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Prime Minister announced the election would be postponed until 17 October.

Parliament was dissolved on 6 September and official campaigning began a week later.

Advance voting began on 3 October and Polling Day was 11 October.

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<sup>1</sup> [Are you eligible to enrol and vote?](#) New Zealand Electoral Commission [accessed 23 October 2020]

<sup>2</sup> [What is the MMP voting system?](#) New Zealand Parliament / Pāremata Aotearoa, 27 May 2020

<sup>3</sup> ['MMP maths: How party vote percentages become seats in parliament'](#), *The Spinoff*, 14 September 2017

## 2. 2020 General Election

### 2.1 Political parties

Five political parties won seats at the last election in 2017, with a further party gaining traction in the 2020 campaign.

#### Labour

The Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, is leader of [New Zealand's Labour Party](#), one of the two major political parties in the country. This is a centre-left party, based on its founding principle of democratic socialism. Formed in 1916 from various socialist parties and trade unions, Labour is the country's oldest political party still in existence. Labour has been in government six times and has seen ten party leaders become prime ministers.

For the 2020 election, Labour's [manifesto](#) set out its priorities:

- setting COVID recovery plan as top priority in Government
- further priorities reflecting stability, continuity and certainty
- embedding five key principles of Labour's COVID plan
- establishing people, jobs, infrastructure, small businesses, and global trade and connections as foundations for next term
- applying Labour values to health, economic and social response

#### National

Along with Labour, the [New Zealand National Party](#) is one of the country's two main political parties. A centre-right party, National tends to be economically liberal and socially conservative, promoting individual freedom, personal responsibility and competitive enterprise. Formed in 1936 as a combination of the Reform and United parties to oppose the growing labour movement, National has been in government five times and has had eight leaders become prime minister.

Ahead of the 2020 election, the National party set out its key [priorities](#):

- responsible economic management
- delivering infrastructure
- reskilling and retraining the New Zealand workforce
- a greener, smarter future
- building stronger communities

#### ACT

The [ACT Party](#) is a right-wing libertarian party that advocates free market policies and reducing the role of government. ACT was formed in 1994 from the Association of Consumers and Taxpayers by former National MP Derek Quigly and former Labour minister of finance Roger Douglas. It has held seats in parliament since 1996 and gave support to the fifth National government from 2008 to 2017, through a confidence and supply agreement.

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ACT set out several [policy priorities](#) ahead of the 2020 election, the lead ones being:

- a 5-point plan for economic recover
- a Covid-19 response
- transforming mental health
- solutions for small and medium enterprises
- defending freedom of expression
- a middle income tax cut

### Green

The [Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand](#) is a left-wing party focused on environmental and social justice issues and honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi 1840), which provided for British settlers and Māori people to live together under a common set of laws. Formed in 1990 from the Values Party, the Greens first entered Parliament in 1996 and has supported some Labour governments through a confidence and supply agreement.

The Greens published a [complete party policy](#) ahead of the general election, with the main [focuses](#) being:

- fairer communities
- healthy nature
- climate action

### NZ First

[New Zealand First](#) (commonly known as NZ First) is a nationalist populist party. Formed in 1993 after its leader and founder Winston Peters resigned from the then-governing National Party, NZ First has formed coalition governments with both major political parties in New Zealand.

NZ First set out its [policies](#) across several major themes:

- business and enterprise
- education and training
- finance and the economy
- democracy, law and order
- environment
- primary industries
- foreign affairs, trade and defence
- infrastructure
- social development
- broadcasting and the arts
- health

### Māori

The [Māori Party](#) is a Māori-led and Māori-focused party. It was formed in 2004 after a split from the Labour Party, following the passing of the controversial Foreshore and Seabed Act. The party aims to uphold te Tiriti o Waitangi whilst representing Māori with an independent voice.

The Māori Party's [policies](#) and practices aim to provide for the wellbeing of all, recognising that the outcomes of the extended Māori family must be improved if New Zealand is to be a truly diverse and happy nation.

## 2.2 Party leaders

The incumbent Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, stood for re-election as leader of the Labour Party. The leader of the party winning the most seats in the general election does not necessarily become Prime Minister; indeed, Jacinda Ardern first assumed office in October 2017 in a minority coalition with NZ First and a confidence and supply agreement with the Green Party. This was despite the National Party winning the most seats in Parliament.

### Jacinda Ardern (Labour)

Jacinda Ardern was born in Hamilton, North Island, New Zealand on 26 July 1980. She graduated from Waikato University with a bachelor's degree in Communication Studies in 2001. Married to Clarke Gayford, they have a young daughter, Neve Te Aroha Ardern Gayford, born on 21 June 2018.

Ardern spent her early years in Murupara, a small town best known as a centre of Maori gang activity, and her inspiration to later enter politics came from seeing "children without shoes on their feet or anything to eat for lunch".<sup>4</sup>

In 1999 Ardern joined the Labour Party and became involved in the re-election campaign of Harry Duynhoven, a Labour MP in the New Plymouth district. After graduating from university, she became a researcher for another Labour MP, Phil Goff. From there Ardern went on to take a position on the staff of then Prime Minister Helen Clark.

In 2005 Ardern left for the UK, spending two-and-a-half years as a policy adviser at the Cabinet Office during Tony Blair's premiership.

Ardern was chosen as Labour's candidate for the Waikato district in 2008 and, although losing the seat by some 13,000 votes, she entered parliament as a list candidate under the MMP electoral system. At 28, Ardern was the youngest member of the House of Representatives.

On 1 August 2017 Jacinda Ardern was appointed leader of the Labour Party and, less than three months later, on 2 October, was appointed Prime Minister of New Zealand.

Ardern has long campaigned on social issues such as housing affordability, improved healthcare, raising the minimum wage, free university education, decriminalisation of abortion and the creation of new programmes to alleviate poverty among children.

During her premiership she has been praised for the manner in which she responded to major national events, such as: the March 2019 shootings in two Christchurch mosques that killed 50 people; the volcanic explosion on White Island in December 2019, which claimed 21

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<sup>4</sup> [Jacinda Ardern: prime minister of New Zealand](#), Britannica.com, 21 October 2020

lives; and her response to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, with New Zealand becoming one of the first countries to close its borders and impose a strict nationwide lockdown.

### **Judith Collins (National)**

Judith Collins was born in Hamilton, North Island, New Zealand on 24 February 1959. She graduated from the University of Auckland with a Bachelor of Laws degree and went on to become a Master of Laws with Honours and a Master of Taxation Studies, also from the University of Auckland. At university, Collins met her husband, David Wong Tung, a Chinese-Samoan police officer.

Before entering politics, Collins was a lawyer and company director.

In 2002 she was elected as MP for Clevedon. In 2008, with her constituency disappearing under boundary changes, Collins was elected MP for Papakura and, in the new government, appointed Minister of Police and Minister of Corrections.

She held further ministerial positions in subsequent years and, on 14 July 2020, was elected leader of the National Party after the sudden resignation of Todd Muller.

### **David Seymour (ACT)**

David Seymour was born on 24 June 1983 and grew up in Whangerei, before moving to Auckland as a teenager. He graduated from the University of Auckland with a degree in Electrical Engineering and Philosophy.

Soon after graduating and starting work as an engineer, Seymour moved to Canada and worked as a policy analyst for the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and the Manning Centre, before returning to New Zealand in 2011.

In 2014 he was elected MP for Epsom, a seat he has kept ever since. On 7 October 2014, Seymour was elected leader of the ACT New Zealand party.

### **James Shaw and Marama Davidson (Green)**

James Shaw and Marama Davidson are co-leaders of the Green Party.

James Shaw was born on 6 May 1973 in Wellington and later attended Wellington High School and Victoria University of Wellington.

In 1998, he moved to London, where he spend 12 years working with multinational firms on sustainable business practices.

On 20 September 2014 Shaw was elected to the New Zealand Parliament as a List member and, on 8 April 2018, he became co-leader of the Greens.

Marama Davidson was born in 1973 in Auckland and has since lived in various cities across New Zealand. She graduated from the University of Auckland with a Bachelor of Arts degree and also holds a Graduate Diploma in International Diplomacy for Indigenous Studies, through Te

Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi (an indigenous tertiary education provider). She is married to Paul Davidson and they have six children.

Davidson worked for the New Zealand Human Rights Commission from 2003-12 and was first elected to the New Zealand Parliament on 2 November 2015 as a List member.

She took up her role as party co-leader on 8 April 2018.

### **Winston Peters (NZ First)**

Winston Peters was born on 11 April 1945 in Whangarei and studied at the Auckland Teachers' Training College. He later studied history, politics and law and the University of Auckland.

Peters was first elected to the New Zealand Parliament on 25 November 1978, as a member of the National party. He lost his seat at the next election but returned to Parliament at the subsequent election (in 1984).

In April 1993, Peters resigned from the National party and sat as an independent MP, before founding the NZ First party that July. He lost his seat again in the 2008 but returned at the next election in 2011.

Winston Peters has held several Ministerial positions during his time in Parliament, as well as two tenures as Deputy Prime Minister and, on 21 June 2018, began a six-week term as Acting Prime Minister to cover Jacinda Ardern's maternity leave.

Peters went on to lose his seat in this 2020 General Election.

### **John Tamihere and Debbie Ngarewa-Packer (Māori)**

John Tamihere and Debbie Ngarewa-Packer are co-leaders of the Māori party.

John Tamihere was born on 8 February 1959 in Point Chevalier, Auckland. He attended the University of Auckland, securing a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1981 and a Bachelor of Laws degree in 1984; the first in his family to attend university.

He worked as a lawyer and as a lecturer in Maori land law at Auckland University before entering politics.

First elected in 1999 as a Labour MP, he held Ministerial positions before losing his seat in the 2005 general election.

In 2020 Tamihere joined the Māori party and was confirmed as the Māori Party's candidate for the Tāmaki Makaurau constituency. In April he was elected co-leader of the party but surrendered this position as he failed to win the seat. Rawiri Waititi – having won a seat in the election – automatically replaced Tamihere as co-leader of the party.

Debbie Ngarewa-Packer was born in South Taranaki, New Zealand, and grew up in Pātea, attending New Plymouth Girls' High School.

She was elected to South Taranaki District Council in the 2007 local elections but did not seek re-election in 2010.

Elected co-leader of the Māori party in April 2020, this general election was Ngarewa-Packer's first time standing for Parliament. Preliminary

results reveal she did not win the seat but, once the final tally is published on 6 November, she may yet enter Parliament as a List MP.

## 2.3 Election campaign

The election campaign was low-key, with the key issue being responding to Covid-19, something that the party leaders generally agreed on.

Initially, before the Government closed New Zealand's borders on 20 March, opinion polls had pointed to a close election, but support moved sharply to the Labour party as the country eliminated community transmission in a matter of months. Most commentators observed this was largely a Covid-related election.

Other issues in the election campaign included concerns about how the country would recover economically from the pandemic, with New Zealand in its deepest recession for decades.

Housing affordability and child poverty were other important areas, as well as debate on the two referendums that were taking place on election day: one to decriminalise the recreational use of marijuana; the other to allow some terminally ill people to request assisted dying.

## 2.4 Election results

The incumbent Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, won a landslide victory in the general election.

With all votes counted, the Labour Party won 49.1 per cent, bringing a projected 64 seats. This was Labour's best performance in a general election in half a century and the party is expected to become the first party since the introduction of proportional representation in 1993 to be able to form a majority government without a coalition partner, though may still choose to do so.

The main opposition – the National Party – won 26.8 per cent of votes, securing just 35 seats in the 120-seat assembly.

These preliminary results were released on 30 October, with the official results of the general election and referendums to be published on 6 November, once overseas and special votes have been counted.

Party	No. of votes	% of votes	Projected		
			Electorate Seats	List Seats	Total Seats
Labour Party	1,171,544	49.1	43	21	64
National Party	638,606	26.8	26	9	35
ACT New Zealand	190,139	8.0	1	9	10
Green Party	180,347	7.6	1	9	10
Māori Party	23,932	1.0	1	-	1
New Zealand First Party	63,534	2.7	-	-	-
New Conservative	35,971	1.5	-	-	-
The Opportunities Party (TOP)	33,727	1.4	-	-	-
Advance NZ	20,878	0.9	-	-	-
Aotearoa Legalise Cannabis Party	7,590	0.3	-	-	-
ONE Party	6,474	0.3	-	-	-
Vision New Zealand	2,780	0.1	-	-	-
NZ Outdoors Party	2,596	0.1	-	-	-
TEA Party	1,871	0.1	-	-	-
Sustainable New Zealand Party	1,469	0.1	-	-	-
Social Credit	1,351	0.1	-	-	-
HeartlandNZ	987	0.0	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,383,796</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>120</b>

Source: [New Zealand Electoral Commission](#)

## 2.5 The 53rd Parliament

Before the new parliament can be formally opened, there are some processes that need to happen.

Under New Zealand's system of proportional representation, two or more parties often negotiate coalition or support agreements so that a government can be formed. The 53rd Parliament must be formed by 24 December.<sup>5</sup>

Although the Labour Party has enough MPs to govern alone, Jacinda Ardern is understood to be in talks with the Green Party to build a wider consensus.

This period after the election, while the government is being formed, is known as the "caretaker period".

When the new Parliament opens, it is set to be the most inclusive ever, with several minority ethnic members (including those from indigenous communities), LGBTIQ+ members and a high number of female MPs.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the older, white, male members lost their seats, a notable one being Winston Peters (leader of the NZ First party who was first elected in 1978).

The NZ First Party, a coalition partner in government with Labour from 2017, lost all of its seats in the 2020 general election.

<sup>5</sup> [The new Parliament: So what happens now the General Election is over?](#) New Zealand Parliament / Pāremata Aotearoa, 20 October 2020

<sup>6</sup> ['New Zealand elects most diverse parliament boosting female, LGBTIQ+ and Māori MPs'](#), *the Guardian*, 19 October 2020

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