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Tied to a Star: The Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand and the 2020 Election

In the 2020 General Election, the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand appeared ideally positioned to capitalise on its association with the Labour-NZ First coalition, led by Jacinda Ardern. Leading up to the election campaign, the Green Party presented itself as a progressive partner for the dominant Labour Party against weak opposition from the National Party. During the campaign, polls suggested that there was a risk the party would not pass the threshold for representation in Parliament, leading to the vigorous targeting of the Auckland City electorate seat. The strategy was successful, as the Green Party slightly increased its representation and won the electorate seat. Securing an agreement with the Labour Party could ensure continued policy influence but does raise concerns about the potential for fragmentation, in view of the party's non-conformist roots and the urgency of the environmental challenges ahead.

Keywords: Aotearoa New Zealand, Green Party, Election, Covid-19

The Campaign

The 2020 General Election was one of the most unusual in New Zealand's history. In addition to a context dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic response and rebuilding, the election was held in conjunction with two major referendums (one on cannabis legislation and one on assisted dying). It was also characterised by chaos within the main opposition National Party, which had three leaders in the four months preceding the election and saw multiple scandals involving MPs, as campaign preparation began. A COVID-19 lockdown in Auckland at the end of August led to the election being rescheduled a month later than planned, though campaigning was already

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underway. A strong drive for advance voting from both the Electoral Commission and many politicians led to almost 60% of votes being cast over the fortnight before election day.

The election presented the Green Party with an opportunity to further consolidate its position as a credible governing partner. The tripartite governing arrangement of the preceding term – though marked in its final months by growing acrimony from the populist New Zealand First Party toward its Green and Labour Party partners – had been successful in achieving several major policy goals. The Greens had built a reputation for policy effectiveness and the leadership could demonstrate concrete wins in areas such as housing quality, family and domestic violence, pay equity, and environmental policy. Most notably, as Minister for Climate Change, co-leader James Shaw had been responsible for ensuring the highly significant Climate Change Response (Zero Carbon) Amendment Bill, passed with the support of all Parliamentary parties other than the hard-right ACT Party.

There were fears, however, that the Green Party was tied too closely to Labour, which would harm its vote share. The received wisdom amongst many commentators was that small parties would inherently see their popularity fall when in Coalition and empirical evidence seemed to bear this out, with no minor party in New Zealand increasing its vote share after being part of a governing arrangement (see Miller and Curtin, 2011). This might have particularly been the case in contrast to the apparent personal popularity of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and her prominence during the Covid-19 response. The Green Party did not hold any portfolios related to the pandemic and had strongly supported the government's response, meaning that it had

little profile around the dominant election issue. Moreover, the strong performance and popularity of the Labour Party going into the campaign presented a particular risk, in view of the co-variation of parties' votes in previous elections (see O'Brien, 2013). As Table 1 shows, in 2017 the Green party had seen its support fall from the high points it achieved while Labour was struggling, to a level more aligned with the years of the popular Helen Clark Government (1999-2008), although this also suggested the existence of a core vote that could ensure its continued presence in Parliament.

These issues came to the fore when polling results over the campaign period consistently showed that support for the Green Party was only marginally above the threshold required for representation under New Zealand's Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) electoral system. Under this system, individual voters have two votes: one for a local electorate candidate (with winners determined through a simple plurality of the vote) and one for the preferred party. The party vote determines a party's total share of seats in Parliament, making them more influential than electorate votes in determining the makeup of Parliament.¹ A party must either receive at least 5% of the party vote or win at least one electorate (the 'electorate lifeboat') to gain parliamentary representation. The widespread perception that the Greens tended to underperform on election day compared to their pre-election polls raised fears that the Greens would not pass the threshold and miss out on representation in Parliament.

The campaign itself also involved challenges, including a lack of airtime as coverage was dominated by either COVID-19 news or coverage of the two main parties. Issues of anticipated

prominence – such as climate change or housing affordability – received relatively little regard in comparison to debate over how the government had led the pandemic response and proposals to address its long-term economic and social impact. The Green’s proposal for a wealth tax did garner media attention, especially in comparison with Labour’s very modest proposals for taxation reform (Cooke 2020). In policy terms, however, the campaign remained essentially a ‘COVID election’, in which many of the Greens’ key priority areas were side-lined. Green Party co-leader James Shaw was also the subject of a minor scandal when it was revealed he had advocated providing funds to a privately-owned ‘Green School’ as an economic development initiative, when subsidising private education providers was against Green Party policy. This led to Shaw making a formal apology to the membership, revealing apparent tensions between the Party’s radical progressive and pragmatic reformist wings.

[Table 1 about here]

In this context, the Green Party adopted two notable campaign approaches. Tactically, it campaigned directly and vigorously for the electorate seat of Auckland Central as a way to negate the threshold risk. With the retirement of National Party MP Nikki Kaye, this seat was considered to be highly marginal and left-leaning, as her incumbency was believed to be based on personal appeal. Winning an electorate would lead to the party vote threshold being waived, and the Party was confident that its star MP Chlöe Swarbrick would hold strong appeal to the generally progressive ‘urban liberal’ electorate. The decision to place significant resource into this campaign became a point of friction between Green and Labour activists, particularly on social

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media. Labour accused Swarbrick of mounting a quixotic campaign that would split the left vote – an accusation that seemed to gain weight when polls showed her in third place – while Green supporters accused Labour of arrogance and a sense of entitlement (see 1 News, 2020).

Strategically, the Party took the opposite approach not only to its Auckland Central campaign but also to that of Labour's other support party. The Winston Peters-led New Zealand First Party approached the campaign by emphasising its difference from Labour and the Greens, and its ability to act as a check on the power of those parties. This represented a way to distinguish the Party from its coalition partner and preserve a distinct political identity. The Green Party went against this rule of thumb, however, fully embracing Labour's popularity by linking itself strongly to them and its exceptionally popular leader. This was particularly relevant as the promise of a 'transformational' government, which formed a core part of Labour's 2017 campaign (Ardern, 2019), was not borne out by the more managerial and less revolutionary reality. This included the failure to enact some high-profile, progressive initiatives, such as introducing a Capital Gains Tax or significant recommendations from a working group on welfare reform, often as a result of New Zealand First's opposition from within Cabinet.

The strategy of tying itself closely to Labour provided both practical and principled rationales for those on the broader left to vote Green. Firstly, it portrayed voting for the Party as a way to ensure that Labour had an ideologically progressive support party that would help it form a Government. The strategy drew on Labour's polling dominance to position its electoral victory as near-inevitable, and construct the 'real' issue at stake as being whether Labour would need to

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rely on the Greens or New Zealand First to govern. Secondly, the Green Party could position itself as a facilitator of the goals and messages the Labour Party campaigned on in 2017. This enabled it to make a play for the more left-wing of Labour's voters by framing a vote for the Greens as a vote for implementation of the vision associated with Jacinda Ardern's transformational 'brand'.

Election Result and Future Direction

In contrast to fears during the campaign, the Green Party performed strongly in the election, increasing its vote share to 7.9% and yielding 10 seats in Parliament (see Table 2). This represented the only time under MMP that a minor party's vote had increased after being part of a government support arrangement. Not only did it comfortably pass the threshold, its campaign success was symbolised by a surprising clear victory in the Auckland Central electorate. This was only the second time the Green Party had won an electorate seat since standing as an independent party in 1999, and the first that it had won without Labour Party endorsement.

Overall, the electoral terrain continued to be dominated by the major parties, and the incumbent Labour Party secured sufficient votes to govern alone; the first time a party was able to do so since the MMP electoral system was introduced in 1996.² However, the electoral share of the two major parties actually declined from 81% in 2017 to 76%. This decrease was largely due to the poor showing of the National Party. Although it had been the largest single party in the 2017-2020 parliament, a range of factors saw it plummet to its second-worst result in history. Movement amongst minor parties beyond the Greens was mixed. The ACT Party capitalised on the National Party's disarray, a resurgent firearms lobby, and its leader's association with the

end-of-life referendum, to achieve its highest ever vote share. The left-wing ethnonationalist/postcolonial Māori Party recorded the same vote percentage as in 2017 but re-entered Parliament by winning an electorate seat. New Zealand First returned its worst result of all time and failed to gain representation.

[Table 2 about here]

The election result presented some intriguing possibilities and questions for the Green Party. Having secured an outright majority, the Labour Party was not required to work with any other party in order to govern and was in a clear position of strength. Despite this, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced her intention to negotiate a relationship with the Green Party. This decision was likely based on the effective working relationship between the two parties over the previous term, but also with an eye on New Zealand's short electoral cycle and the need to cultivate allies for the future. Negotiations started shortly after election day, before the final election results were confirmed. Entering the negotiations created opportunities for direct power but also presented risks to the Green Party, in being too closely linked to the governing party. This stance represented a concern amongst some members that tying the Party too closely to Labour would restrict its ability to advocate for the more expansive and far-reaching policy positions. To this end, several prominent former Green Party figures argued that the Greens should remain outside of Government as a 'Left Opposition' (Radio New Zealand, 2020).

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The content of the resulting 'Cooperation Agreement' was announced on 31 October 2020 and saw the Green co-leaders James Shaw and Marama Davidson secure positions outside cabinet as Minister of Climate Change and Minister for the Prevention of Family and Sexual Violence respectively (as well as associate ministerial roles). The agreement also set out specific policy areas where the two parties agreed to work together, including child wellbeing, electoral reform, and environmental policy. However, the agreement represented a weaker position than that following the 2017 election. Notably, while Shaw received an Associate Environment role focused on biodiversity, the Greens lost the Conservation, Transport, and Associate Finance portfolios, providing fewer formal levers to address the underlying causes of environmental degradation and sustainability. Conversely, and perhaps in response to the concerns about close association noted above, the document also explicitly allowed for the Green Party to determine its own position on areas beyond those where policy cooperation is specifically established, allowing the party an unusual degree of freedom to criticise and even oppose the Labour Government's position. Despite some concern that party members would not ratify the agreement (especially as this required 75% support), it was backed by 85% of delegates.

The Green Party's fortunes need to be considered over the longer-term, when assessing whether the 2020 result represents consolidation or a basis for further change. Success in 2020 came despite a strong Labour performance, presenting the possibility that the Green Party may have solidified a strong independent vote base. Having moved from its unconventional origins as a 'ragtag bunch of organics-obsessed, dope-smoking, sandal-wearing subversive semi-hippies' (Bale, 2003: 140), the party has proven itself to be a credible governing partner. Similarly, and in

contrast to the other minor parties, the Green Party has consistently passed the 5% threshold - in spite of changes in leadership and the risks associated with its support party status - and has achieved clear gains over its first term as a formal part of Government. This suggests the party has established a position from which it is able to genuinely affect the course of policy in areas of concern. However, its success may also have been in part due to the Party rhetorically tying itself to Labour and, in the context of a highly unusual election campaign, drawing support from Labour voters who sit ideologically within the zone of overlap between the two parties. Moreover, the next term will see the Green Party linked closely to Labour's majority administration but, while no longer facing the roadblock of New Zealand First, it will possess fewer levers to pursue policy goals than in the previous three years. The increased sense of urgency around environmental issues and the Greens' non-conformist roots also mean that potential for future divisions remain, as pragmatists and idealists vie to determine the party's direction (Giovannetti, 2020). There remains uncertainty as to whether success, associated with close ties to the star that is Jacinda Ardern's leadership, will ultimately generate discontent and fragmentation.

¹ For further detail see Arseneau and Roberts (2015).

² Indeed, the final tally showed Labour commanding just over 50% of all valid votes, an exceptionally rare feat in proportional voting systems.

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