

Back on Track?: The New Zealand General Election of 2023.

Edited by Stephen Levine.

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This thirteenth volume in Stephen Levine's long-running election series continues a project of sustained documentary and analytical importance to the study of New Zealand politics. Spanning the full electoral history from first-past-the-post through the mixed-member proportional (MMP) era, the series constitutes one of the most consistent longitudinal records of democratic practice in any comparable polity. Levine, Professor of Political Science at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington and founder of its parliamentary internship programme, has been editor and contributor to volumes covering every MMP election from 1996 to 2023. That institutional continuity is itself a scholarly achievement: few comparable democracies have produced anything approaching this level of systematic electoral documentation across successive cycles.

The present volume addresses what may be characterised as a moment of political rupture: the midterm resignation of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, the brief and ultimately unsuccessful premiership of Chris Hipkins, Labour's decisive electoral defeat, and the subsequent formation of a three-party coalition under National's Christopher Luxon. The irony of that coalition's composition is not lost: having campaigned against a putative 'coalition of chaos' on the political left, Luxon found himself managing the inherent tensions of a National–ACT–New Zealand First arrangement, a dynamic the volume's contributors examine with varying degrees of critical attention.

The subtitle, 'Back on Track?', is borrowed from National's campaign slogan, but its interrogative inflection invites a more critical reading: whether the election represents a durable reorientation of New Zealand's democratic trajectory, or merely the routine alternation of governing parties characteristic of mature Westminster-derived systems. The question gestures toward broader concerns about electoral volatility, institutional trust, and the health of MMP as a framework for stable coalition governance, concerns that animate some of the volume's more theoretically ambitious contributions, even if they remain insufficiently synthesised at the editorial level.

The collection assembles more than forty contributors drawn from academia, journalism, party politics, and campaign management, including all major party leaders of the 2023 contest: Christopher Luxon, David Seymour, Winston Peters, Chris Hipkins, James Shaw, Marama Davidson, and Brooke van Velden. Alongside these practitioner voices, established academic contributors (among them Nigel S. Roberts, Therese Arseneau, and Stephen Church, veterans of previous volumes) are joined by first-time participants including Natalia Albert, Sophie Trigger, and Jacqui van der Kaay. The result is a characteristic blend of empirical record and interpretive narrative that has long distinguished the series from more narrowly academic treatments.

Particularly noteworthy is Luke Oldfield's examination of the 2022 occupation of Parliament grounds. Drawing on comparative literature on populism and anti-establishment mobilisation,

Oldfield situates the protest (which at its peak drew an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 participants and lasted twenty-three days before police intervention) within broader global currents of political distrust. His analysis is careful to distinguish between the protest's heterogeneous composition (ranging from Christian fundamentalists to individuals with links to white supremacist groups, alongside some Māori participants who framed opposition to vaccine mandates in terms of Indigenous sovereignty) and its limited translation into electoral outcomes. The most successful fringe party of the 2023 election, New Zealand Loyal, managed approximately one percent of the party vote, a result consistent with Oldfield's argument that populist sentiment, while present, had not achieved the electoral crystallisation some commentators anticipated. The chapter also traces the political opportunism the protest encouraged, including Winston Peters' attendance, and connects this to his subsequent rehabilitation as kingmaker, a thread that carries significant analytical weight across the volume as a whole.

Jacqui van der Kaay's contribution on ministerial conduct and political integrity engages questions of institutional trust, tracing the cumulative reputational costs of governance failures for Labour's claim to competence as its principal electoral asset. Several chapters address transformations in the media environment, contributing to an emergent literature on the fragmentation of the public sphere in small-state democracies. Contributors document declining institutional trust in legacy media, the accelerating influence of social media on political communication, and the challenge that information disorder poses for electoral deliberation, themes whose connection to the protest movement Oldfield analyses is implicit but underexplored. The editorial decision to incorporate political cartoons as interpretive artefacts is methodologically interesting, reflecting a recognition that visual political culture operates as a distinct register of meaning that resists straightforward textual summary.

The closing chapter by Levine extends the volume's scope beyond the immediate electoral cycle to consider emergent policy domains (including New Zealand's developing space sector and the creation of an associated ministerial portfolio) gesturing toward the longer-term governing agenda of the incoming coalition. This forward orientation, unusual in election studies, usefully contextualises the electoral outcome within questions of policy direction, though it also risks the speculative quality that comes from proximity to events.

The volume's most significant scholarly contribution lies in its function as a component of a longitudinal archive. The series enables the kind of cross-temporal comparison (of electoral volatility, coalition formation, party system change, and institutional adaptation) that is otherwise methodologically difficult to sustain. For researchers working on New Zealand's electoral system, party politics, or coalition bargaining dynamics, it represents a primary resource of considerable value. The 2023 election, with its unusual concatenation of leadership transition, inflated Green and Te Pāti Māori votes that nonetheless returned both parties to opposition, and New Zealand First's structural leverage under MMP, offers particularly rich material for comparative electoral analysis.

The inclusion of practitioner contributions also yields insights not typically available through conventional academic channels. Hipkins' account of Labour's campaign difficulties provides a degree of access to internal deliberation that enriches, even as it complicates, scholarly analysis of

the party's defeat. Peters' contribution illuminates the enduring structural logic of small-party leverage under MMP, a dynamic well-theorised in the comparative literature but here rendered with notable specificity. The volume was launched at Unity Books Wellington in October 2024, drawing many of its contributors together, a fact that speaks to the civic as well as scholarly role the series has come to occupy in New Zealand's political culture.

The eclecticism that gives the volume its breadth also generates methodological inconsistency. Contributions range from carefully theorised empirical analyses to largely anecdotal personal accounts, and the absence of a unifying editorial framework obliges readers to perform much of the synthetic labour themselves. While Levine's introduction competently situates the election in historical context, the subtitle's central conceptual question (what it would mean for New Zealand to be 'back on track', and by what criteria such a determination might be made) is not adequately operationalised. The phrase carries different implications depending on whether it is applied to National's electoral fortunes, the stability of MMP, or the broader health of democratic institutions; these registers are not sufficiently distinguished.

Several substantively important themes also receive less sustained analytical attention than their electoral significance warrants. Economic conditions, particularly inflationary pressures and the cost-of-living concerns that were central to voter decision-making, are addressed only in passing, with limited engagement with the political economy literature on retrospective economic voting. Māori political mobilisation and its relationship to Te Pāti Māori's resurgence merits more systematic treatment than it receives here; the structural paradoxes of MMP for smaller parties are implicit throughout but never fully theorised. Generational dimensions of electoral change, increasingly central to comparative electoral research, are similarly underdeveloped.

A further limitation, common to volumes of this type, is that practitioner contributions occasionally read as exercises in post-hoc justification rather than reflective analysis. Greater editorial insistence on critical engagement, or the systematic inclusion of countervailing perspectives, would strengthen the volume's scholarly integrity. The disjuncture between the sophistication of the series' better academic chapters and the occasionally thin reflections of political participants is not unique to this instalment, but it is sufficiently persistent to warrant editorial attention in future volumes.

Back on Track?: The New Zealand General Election of 2023 succeeds in its primary documentary and interpretive objectives. The electoral dynamics it records such as Labour's historic defeat, National's return to government under an internally contradictory coalition, and Peters' renewed structural influence as kingmaker are examined through a sufficient plurality of perspectives to resist narrative reductionism. As a component of a long-running series that functions as the principal longitudinal record of New Zealand democratic practice, the volume makes a contribution that extends well beyond the immediate electoral moment.

For scholars of New Zealand politics, electoral systems, and comparative democracy, it is an essential purchase. General readers seeking an analytically informed account of a consequential election will also find it rewarding, though the range of register and quality across chapters is at times uneven. The 2023 election raised fundamental questions about the relationship between

populist mobilisation and electoral outcomes, the sustainability of multi-party coalition governance, and the structural position of smaller parties under MMP, questions whose full significance will only become clear in light of the current parliamentary term and beyond. Whether the country is truly 'back on track' will be for future volumes in this admirable series to judge.