Political Parties

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NEW ZEALAND: The Party System fro

In 1963, the National Party, under Prime Minister Keith Holyoake, was reelected to its majority in the House of Representatives, New Zealand's unicameral legislature, although it lost two seats. Again in 1966 and 1969, the National Party emerged the winner, although its majority continued to decline. In 1966, the Social Credit Political League won its first seat, although it lost the seat three years later.

The 1972 election was disastrous for the National Party, as its electoral support dropped only slightly but it lost many of its seats. The Labor Party won 63 percent of the seats, led by Norman Kirk, who would become Prime Minister. Three years later, however, the situation was reversed as the National Party, led by recently elected party leader Robert Muldoon, won 63 percent of the seats. In 1978, the National Party held its majority, although that majority was considerably reduced. The Social Credit Political League again won a seat. In 1981, the majority held, but was further reduced, and Social Credit won two seats on 21 percent of the popular vote.

Three years later, in 1984, Prime Minister Muldoon's government lost the election, as the Labor Party won nearly sixty percent of the seats to establish a government under David Lange; Social Credit, now called the Democratic Party, held its two seats although it only won eight percent of the popular vote. In 1987, the Democratic Party lost its two seats and the National Party gained two seats. The Labor Party held its majority.

From 1987 to 1989, the Prime Minister changed twice, first from Lange to Geoffrey Palmer in 1989, then to Mike Moore in 1990; the government did not appear very stable entering the 1990 elections. Also in 1989, Jim Anderton, a member of parliament in the Labor Party who was displeased with the ideological shift he saw occurring within the party, left the Labor Party to form the New Labor Party, which was ideologically to the left of the Labor Party.

In 1990, Anderton was returned to the House of Representatives as a member of the New Labor Party; the party won no other seats. The National Party, however, won nearly seventy percent of the seats, winning just under fifty percent of the popular vote, and James Bolger became Prime Minister with a strong majority. Meanwhile, seven percent of the popular vote went to the newly renamed Green Party, formerly the Values Party, which had never won more than five percent of the vote prior to 1990. The Green Party failed to win a seat. Two other minor leftist parties failed to win seats.

In 1991, a major union of parties occurred as five leftist parties joined to form the Alliance. The parties involved were the New Labor Party, the Democratic Party, The Green Party, and two much smaller parties: Mana Motuhake and the Liberal Party. The Alliance first contested the 1993 election; it won eighteen percent of the vote and two parliamentary seats. Also in 1993, Winston Peters, a former cabinet minister, left the National Party to form New Zealand First, which won two seats in the 1993 election. The National Party, meanwhile, maintained its majority, although it held only the exact number of seats needed to form a majority, fifty out of 99.

Also in 1993, New Zealand voted by referendum to change its process of electing the House of Representatives. 54 percent of voters in New Zealand approved the referendum to change the voting system from a constituency-based, first-past-the-post system to a Mixed Member Proportional system, in which half of the seats would be allocated by proportional representation among those parties winning at least five percent of the popular vote or at least one constituency seat. This new system was to be first used in the 1996 elections.

This change was at least in part responsible for the most politically turbulent years in the House of Representatives during this century, which followed the 1993 elections. In 1994, two members of parliament in the governing National Party decided to split off and form the Right of Center Party; this split left the National Party with a large minority rather than a small majority. The end result was that the National Party was forced

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Party with a large minority rather than a small majority. The end result was that the National Party was forced into a coalition government with the Right of Center Party, and little changed except official party affiliation of those two members. In 1995, four members of parliament from the National Party and three from the Liberal Party left their respective parties to form United New Zealand. The National Party government then formed a coalition with United New Zealand to maintain majority support.

The 1996 elections brought several new parties in, competing for the first time. The Right of Center Party failed to win any seats. United New Zealand won only one, although it had seven members prior to the elections. The Association of Consumers and Taxpayers (ACT), a lobbyist group turned political party led by former Labor Party Finance Minister Sir Roger Douglas, won eight seats. The New Zealand First Party was much more successful in its second election than its first, winning seventeen seats. The Alliance won thirteen seats. The National Party emerged the strongest with 44 seats, and the Labor Party won 37. Since no party was close to a majority, this set the stage for a difficult coalition-building process. The National Party and ACT, the more rightist parties, held 44 percent of the seats. The Labor Party and the Alliance, the leftist parties, held 42 percent of the seats. Whichever side New Zealand First would side with could create a majority coalition government. New Zealand First had intentionally been vague about policy preferences during the election so it would be in this very position after the elections. Ultimately, a right of center coalition was formed with the National Party and New Zealand First under Prime Minister Bolger. In 1997, Jenny Shipley took over as Prime Minister, becoming the first woman to hold the position.

In 1997, the Green Party split off of the Alliance to contest elections independently. In 1999, it won seven seats. The Alliance lost a few seats due to this departure. New Zealand First lost most of its seats and the National Party lost a few, as the Labor Party gained twelve seats to become the strongest party currently in the House of Representatives. The 1999 elections were unique in that they may be the only elections ever in any western nation in which the leaders of both major parties were women. Currently the government is led by Prime Minister Helen Clark and is composed of the Labor Party and the Alliance, which together hold a slight minority in parliament. The Green Party has committed to support the government as well.

Continuity and Change in Political Parties, 1963-2000

Original Parties from 1950-1962 continuing to 2000

031 National Party. The National Party was very strong from 1950 all the way through the early 1990s, failing to win a majority in only four elections before 1993, and only once was the National Party in the minority for more than one consecutive term, from 1984 to 1990. After the electoral reforms in 1993, the National Party started experiencing some problems, although it remained the strongest party in parliament until 1999. In 1993, Winston Peters, a former cabinet minister, left the party to form New Zealand First. In 1994, two members of parliament left the National Party to form the Right of Center Party, reducing the party majority to a large minority; the Right of Center Party joined the National Party as a coalition partner. In 1995, four members of parliament left the party to join with three members of parliament who similarly left the Labor Party; these seven formed the United New Zealand Party. Through all this, however, the National Party has maintained a relatively steady, although somewhat declining, level of support.

032 Labor Party. The Labor Party was only able to establish three governments in the four decades before the proportional representation system was adopted in New Zealand. It has, however, remained the strongest minority group for the entire time it was not in power. The Labor Party managed to endure two splits, as Jim Anderton led away a leftist group within the party to form the New Labor Party, and later several members of parliament left to help found the United New Zealand Party. The Labor Party is currently the strongest party in the parliament.

New Parties formed after 1962 but terminating before 2000

033 Democratic Party. Founded in 1954 as the Social Credit Political League, this party was by far the strongest minor party for three and a half decades. Its support peaked at 21 percent of the popular vote in 1981, but it only managed to win two seats. In 1982 it became the Social Credit Party, then in 1984 it became the Democratic Party, although its support dropped dramatically; it never again posted more than ten percent. In 1993, it merged with several other small parties to form the Alliance.

035 New Labor Party. In 1989, Jim Anderton, then a member of the Labor Party, left his party because he felt its ideology was drifting too far right. He led a number of leftists within the party to form the New Labor Party. In 1991, Anderton was the primary figure in the movement to consolidate several small leftist parties, including the New Labor Party, under a common party name, the Alliance.

New Parties formed after 1962 and continuing to 2000

034 Green Party. Founded in 1972 under the name Values, this party won five percent of the popular vote in its second election. After that, the party's support dwindled to next to nothing. In 1990, it was renamed the Green Party and it picked up seven percent of the popular vote, although it failed to win any seats. In 1991, it joined with several other leftist parties to form the Alliance. Six years later, the Green Party left the alliance, and in 1999, it won seven seats on its own.

036 Alliance. The Alliance was formed in 1991 with the uniting of several small leftist parties, including the Green Party, the New Labor Party, Mana Motuhake, the Liberal Party, and the Democratic Party. It has emerged as the third strongest party in New Zealand, despite the fact that the Green Party left in 1997.

037 New Zealand First Party. In 1993, Winston Peters, a former cabinet minister, left the National Party to form New Zealand First. In 1996, it was very successful, winning thirteen percent of the vote and fourteen percent of the seats. In 1999, it lost most of those seats, although it is still a reasonably strong party.

038 United New Zealand. A splinter group formed by members of parliament in 1995, United includes former members from both the Labor and National Parties. It was originally formed by seven members of parliament, but in 1996 it won only one seat. It still holds one seat.

039 Association of Consumers and Taxpayers. Sir Roger Douglas, a former Minister of Finance for the Labor Party, transformed his lobbying organization, the Association of Consumers and Taxpayers, into a political party in 1995. It is a strongly libertarian party, and has been very successful for a new party in the last two elections.

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