

The Conversation: Labour's single-party majority is not a failure of MMP, it is a sign NZ's electoral system is working

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Jacinda Ardern and senior members of the Labour Party hold a media stand up at Crave Cafe in Morningside the day after their victory. Photo / Alex Burton

Other

By Richard Shaw of The Conversation

Even as the results rolled in on election night there were mutterings that a parliamentary majority controlled by one political party is somehow inconsistent with the spirit of MMP. The magnitude of the Jacinda Ardern-led Labour Party's victory will no doubt encourage that view.

Wrong. In at least three respects the election result is exactly what electoral reform was about.

The mandate

A better part of the 20th century single-party majority governments in Aotearoa New Zealand were formed by parties that won a minority of the popular vote. The best example

(or worst, depending on your view) was in 1993, when Jim Bolger's National Party wound up with a manufactured parliamentary majority based on just 35% of the vote.

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You need to go all the way back to 1951 to find the last time a governing party won a majority of the vote.

But you can't get away with this under MMP. Ardern has already racked up Labour's highest share of the vote since the 51.3% Peter Fraser's Labour Party won in 1946. It's also the best performance of any party under MMP.

She's done it at a time when voting for a party other than Labour or National is both possible and pretty normal. If, once special votes have been counted, Labour clears 50% of the vote Ardern will have achieved something no prime minister has done in 70 years.



PM Ardern gestures as she gives her victory speech to Labour Party members at an event in Auckland. Photo / AP

MMP was designed to accurately translate people's votes into parliamentary seats — and that is exactly what it has done.

Policy moderation

Ardern is a centrist, a self-avowed consensus politician. Her single-party majority government will not behave as the Labour and National administrations of the 1980s and 1990s did.

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New Zealanders changed the electoral rules because they were sick of radical swings of the policy pendulum driven by single-party majority governments ruling on the basis of a minority of the vote.

If MMP was designed to do anything it was to lock in policy moderation. In fact, the early 1990s, the Treasury was concerned to implement its favoured neo-liberal reforms before the electoral system changed, precisely because it knew policy radicalism would be next to impossible under MMP.

Where the David Lange-led Labour and Bolger-led National governments of the late 20th century were doctrinaire and divisive, Ardern will be pragmatic and focused on results. For better or worse, she knows exactly where the median voter lives.

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Diversity of representation

For reasonable people, one of the purposes of an electoral system is to produce legislatures that broadly reflect the people who choose them. On at least one count MMP is heading in the right direction.

In 1996, the first MMP parliament doubled the presence of women in the House of Representatives. By 2017 the proportion of women parliamentarians stood at 40%. That figure got another bump on Saturday, pushing the number of women in the 120-member legislature from 49 to 56.

Nearly half (46.5%) of all parliamentarians are now women, the vast majority of them — 73% — members of the Labour or Green parties. This lifts New Zealand from 20th on the international league table to ninth (two spots behind Sweden).

MMP was the winner

This election will change the way politics is done, discussed and practised in Aotearoa NZ due to three significant developments:

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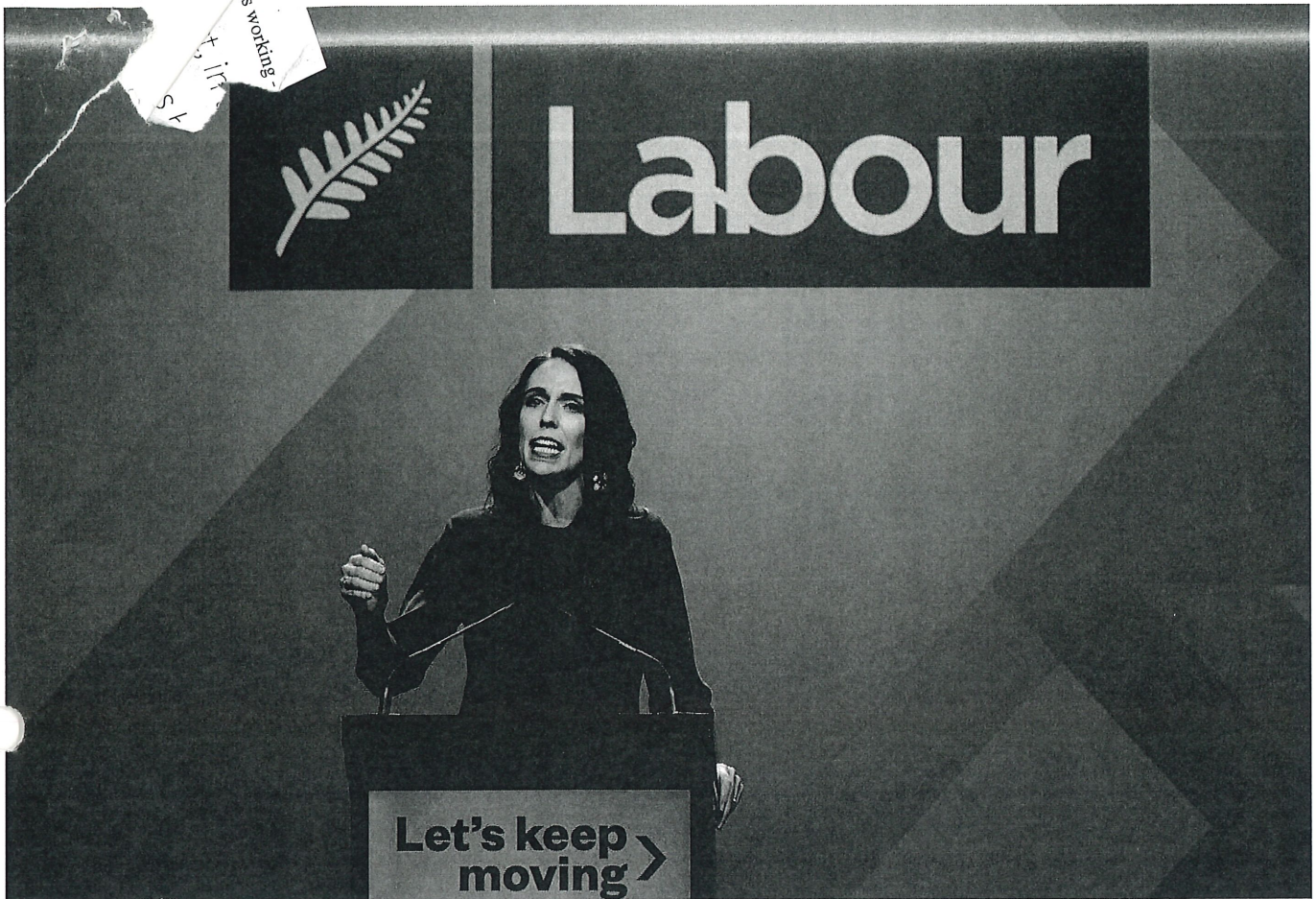
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... has won big in the towns and in the country. National can no longer claim to be the party of rural people, and Labour can no longer be painted as the party of urban élites. In fact, the fundamental question confronting National now is: what kind of party are we?

Once special votes are counted, it is possible Labour will have over 50% of the vote. Not only will it be the first time this has happened since 1951, it will also mean most New Zealanders have chosen a politics of communitarianism over a politics of individualism.

For the first time in our history more people voted before polling day than on the day itself (a lot more — 70% of votes were cast early this year). The very nature of elections has changed; meaning the laws banning political activity on polling day need to be revised. (In the process, the problem of setting an election date to avoid an All Blacks Test might be avoided.)

There is more to be digested, including that this parliament contains no small-party tail to wag the big party's dog. But right now one thing is clear: MMP gets two ticks for its performance this year. It has done exactly what it was designed to do.

Richard Shaw is Professor of Politics at Massey University

