

The 2020 General Election and referendums: results, analysis, and demographics of the 53rd Parliament

Home » Parliamentary Business » Library Research Papers » Research Papers
 » The 2020 General Election and referendums: results, analysis, and demographics of the 53rd Parliament

(Wilson, J., 2023)

Get notifications

Originally published: 4 June 2021
Last updated: 9 February 2023

Click here for PDF (<https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/library-research-papers/research-papers/The-2020-General-Election-and-referendums-results-analysis-and-demographics-of-the-53rd-Parliament#PDF>)

Executive Summary

- The General Election of 17 October 2020 was New Zealand's 53rd since New Zealand held its first in 1853, making New Zealand the ninth-oldest representative democracy in the world.
- The final results confirm five parties have won a total of 120 seats in Parliament, comprising 72 electorate seats and 48 list seats.
- New Zealand's per capita representation, at 2.4 MPs per 100,000 population, is lower than the 37 OECD member average of 2.7 MPs per 100,000 people for lower chambers.
- The Labour Party captured 50.01% of the party vote entitling it to 65 seats in parliament.
- This result is the highest share of the party vote, the highest number of seats, and the first single-party majority government achieved under MMP.
- Under FPP it took an average 14.4 days from the date of the election to the swearing in (government formation) of ministers; under all MMP elections the average is 25.4 days.
- Of 72 electorates, 37 were won by candidates with a majority (over 50%) of valid votes.
- Jacinda Ardern (Labour) achieved the largest winning margin (21,246) in Mt Albert.
- Willow-Jean Prime (Labour) had the lowest winning margin (163) in Northland.
- A record 58 women were elected in 2020, comprising almost half (48.3%) of the 53rd
- There are 25 MPs who have self-identified as being of Māori descent, compared with 28 in the previous parliament. MPs of Māori descent comprise 20.8% of the 53rd
- There are a record 11 MPs who identify as being of Pacific Peoples ethnicity (9.2% of Parliament).
- There are eight MPs who identify as being of Asian ethnicity (6.7% of Parliament).
- For the first time the New Zealand Parliament has two MPs from the Middle Eastern/Latin American/African (MELAA) grouping.
- The youngest MP is 26 years old; the average age of the 53rd Parliament is 47.3 years; the oldest MP is 68 years old.
- Over two-thirds of MPs (68%) are beginning their third term or less in 2020; that is 82 MPs have six years or less of parliamentary experience.
- There are now over a million voters (1,078,100) in the 60+ age group, which now accounts for over one-quarter (28.6%) of all voters.
- Of an estimated 3.8 million people eligible to vote in 2020, almost 900,000 people failed to do so. Of these one quarter (25.4%) were not enrolled, while three-quarters (74.6%) were enrolled, but did not turn out to vote.
- Nearly two-thirds (65.9%) of voters approved the referendum on the End of Life Choice Act.
- Just over half (51.2%) of voters did not support the Cannabis Legalisation and Control Bill.
- The next General Election in New Zealand is likely to be held before Saturday, 13 January 2024.

Final Results after Special Votes

The General Election of 17 October 2020 was New Zealand's 53rd since New Zealand held its first in 1853, with the first Parliament convening in the (then) capital Auckland in 1854. This makes New Zealand the ninth-oldest representative democracy in the world, when ranked in terms of representative parliaments nationally elected on a continuous basis.^[1]

The 2020 election was the ninth election conducted under the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) voting system that was first used for the 1996 general election, and the first to return a single party majority government using MMP. Following the counting of special votes and the release of the official results, there are five political parties and 120 members represented in the 53rd Parliament.

This research paper summarizes differences between the preliminary (election-night count) and the final election results, compares the 2020 election results with those of 2017, shows trends in voter turnout, and analyses the demographic makeup of the 53rd Parliament. It also examines the results of the two referendums held at the same time as the 2020 election – the referendum on the End of Life Choice Act 2019, and the referendum on the proposed Cannabis Legalisation and Control Bill.

Voting in the 2020 General Election began on 30 September 2020 when eligible overseas voters were able to cast a special vote – either by post, or in person at overseas posts. Voters in New Zealand were able to vote in advance of polling day by casting an advance vote during the advance voting period from 3 October to 16 October.

Several measures were put in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These included: advance voting starting two days earlier than initially planned; 1,552 advance voting booths (compared to 485 in 2017) to help reduce queues and give voters more space; larger venues used for voting places such as schools, marae and marae; more limited use of voting places in shopping malls due to the need to provide room for physical distancing.^[2]

ACT New Zealand	0.5	7.6	7.1	1	10	9
Māori Party	1.2	1.2	0.0	0	2	2
New Zealand First	7.2	2.6	-4.6	9	0	-9
Total				120	120	0

Government formation 1969 - 2020

New Zealand's Westminster parliamentary system requires that ministers can only be appointed (issued ministerial warrants) if they have been elected as members of Parliament. This ensures direct accountability of those ministers to the House. There is however no statutory timeframe (contained in legislation) for issuing ministerial warrants (forming a government) following a general election.

The government formation process can begin immediately after election night. This is despite the official results of the election not being returned in the writ until two to three weeks after polling day and, as can be seen above, the potential for special votes to have significant impacts on both parties and potential coalition majorities. Although the government formation process can *begin* after election night it cannot *conclude* (by the issuing of ministerial warrants) until three conditions have been met.

First, that, in the absence of a single party commanding a parliamentary majority, parliamentary parties need to have successfully concluded an agreement to form a government; second, that public statements have been made to that effect; and third that the Governor-General can have confidence that those public statements are correct and or that the proposed government has the confidence (majority support) in Parliament.

By constitutional convention, the Governor-General's task in the government formation process is to ascertain where the support of the House lies, so that a Government can be appointed or confirmed in office. Accordingly, the Governor-General will, by convention, abide by the outcome of the government formation process in appointing a new ministry or accepting the right of the incumbent Government to remain in office. The Governor-General will also accept the decision of the party or parties as to which individual will lead the Government as Prime Minister.

According to Boston and Bullock, the shift to MMP was expected to make the government formation process more complicated and protracted than under FPP.^[6] This was because elections resulting in single-party majority government were thought less likely, requiring negotiations among multiple parliamentary parties before a government that had the support of a majority of MPs could be formed.

Table 4 shows that the government formation process, on average, has indeed been more protracted under MMP than under FPP. Under FPP it took an average 14.4 days from the date of the election to the swearing in (government formation) of ministers; under all MMP elections the average is 25.4 days. To date the longest time to form a government was 65 days following the 1996 election, which was perhaps to be expected, given that this was the first time the government formation process under MMP took place. Excluding the 1996 election the average government formation time under MMP has been 20.5 days.

Table 4: Government formation following general elections 1969 - 2020

Election Date	Appointment of Ministers	Days from election to ministerial appointments	Parliament	Commission Opening	Days from ministerial appointments to Parliament opening
29/11/1969	22/12/1969	23	36th	12/03/1970	80
25/11/1972	8/12/1972	13	37th	14/02/1973	68
29/11/1975	12/12/1975	13	38th	22/06/1976	193
25/11/1978	13/12/1978	18	39th	16/05/1979	154
28/11/1981	11/12/1981	13	40th	6/04/1982	116
14/07/1984	26/07/1984	12	41st	15/08/1984	20
15/08/1987	24/08/1987	9	42nd	16/09/1987	23
27/10/1990	2/11/1990	6	43rd	28/11/1990	26
6/11/1993	29/11/1993	23	44th	21/12/1993	22
12/10/1996	16/12/1996	65	45th	12/12/1996	N/A
27/11/1999	10/12/1999	13	46th	20/12/1999	10

27/07/2002	15/08/2002	19	47th	26/08/2002	11
17/09/2005	19/10/2005	32	48th	7/11/2005	19
8/11/2008	19/11/2008	11	49th	8/12/2008	19
26/11/2011	14/12/2011	18	50th	20/12/2011	6
20/09/2014	8/10/2014	18	51st	20/10/2014	12
23/09/2017	26/10/2017	33	52nd	7/11/2017	12
17/10/2020	6/11/2020	20	53rd	25/11/2020	19
Average FPP 1969-1993		14.4			78.0
Average MMP 1996-2020		25.4			13.5
Average 1999-2020		20.5			13.5

Sources: J O Wilson, *New Zealand Parliamentary Record*, *New Zealand Gazette*, Journals

Table 4 also shows that the government formation process in 2020 took 20 days, which is the fourth-longest period under MMP elections to date. This is perhaps surprising, given that 2020 is the first time a single party majority government has been able to be formed, and one that did not require any negotiations of support with other parties. On 31 October, Jacinda Ardern announced that, despite the Labour Party having won enough seats to continue the Sixth Labour Government on their own, they had invited the Green Party to participate in a "cooperation agreement". The subsequent agreement set out three areas of cooperation: achieving the purpose and goals of the Zero Carbon Act; protecting New Zealand's environment and biodiversity; improving child wellbeing and marginalised communities.^[7]

There is also no statutory requirement for ministers to be appointed prior to the opening of Parliament. A new Government would normally be in place before the new Parliament meets, but in 1996 Parliament opened before ministers were appointed, meaning that a caretaker government continued for four days beyond the opening of Parliament.

Table 4 also illustrates the legislative impact of the Constitution Act 1986 that sought to ensure a greater degree of accountability of ministers to Parliament, primarily by requiring Parliament to meet not later than six weeks after the day fixed for the return of the writs for that election.^[8] As can be seen from the table, the average duration between the formation of the government and the opening of Parliament was 78 days (11 weeks) under FPP elections, compared to under two weeks (13.5 days) under MMP.

Government type 1996-2020

Table 5 shows the type of government formed following general elections, the party or parties that are a formal part of the government, and the party or parties supporting the government. As the table shows, New Zealand's experience of multi-party governments under MMP takes one of four forms: single-party majority government, coalition majority government, single-party minority government and coalition minority government.

1996 is the only election to date to result in a coalition majority government. Minority coalition governments have been most common, with five occurrences since 1996. Single-party minority governments are the next most common, with four instances during the MMP era. The 2020 election is the first to result in a single-party majority government, confirming the comment by Boston and Bulloch above that the move to proportional representation has made this type of government less likely under MMP.

Table 5: Type of Government formed under MMP elections 1996-2020

Government Period	Type of Government	Government Party / Parties (seats)	Government Support Party/Parties (seats)*	Total seats held by Government Parties and Support Parties (Total seats in Parliament)
Dec 1996 – July 1998	Majority coalition	National-New Zealand First (61)	N/A	61 (120)
Aug 1998 – Dec 1999	Single party minority	National (44)	ACT (8); Independent (8); United NZ (1); Mana Wahine Te Ira Tangata (1)	62 (120)
Dec 1999 – Aug 2002	Minority coalition	Labour-Alliance (59)	Green Party (7)	66 (120)

Aug 2002 – Oct 2005	Minority coalition	Labour-Progressive (54)	United Future (8)	62 (120)
Oct 2005 – Nov 2008	Minority coalition	Labour-Progressive (51)	United Future (3); NZ First (7)	61 (121)
Nov 2008 – Nov 2011	Single party minority	National (58)	ACT (5); United Future (1); Māori Party (5)	69 (122)
Dec 2011 – Sept 2014	Single party minority	National (59)	ACT (1); United Future (1); Māori Party (3)	64 (121)
Oct 2014 – Sept 2017	Single party minority	National (60)	ACT (1); United Future (1); Māori Party (2)	64 (121)
Oct 2017 – Oct 2020	Minority coalition	Labour-New Zealand First (55)	Green Party (8)	63 (120)
Nov 2020 –	Single party majority	Labour (65)	Green Party (10)	75 (120)

*Government support party / parties refers to those parties who promise either support or abstention on votes of "Confidence and Supply" in exchange for either ministers or spokesperson roles outside cabinet. See Jonathan Boston and David Bullock, 'Experiments in Executive Government under MMP in New Zealand: Contrasting Approaches to MultiParty Governance', in *New Zealand Journal of Public and International Law*, Special Conference Issue: MMP and the Constitution, Vol. 7(1), June 2009.

Party Vote Share and Seats in Parliament: 1969-2020

Under elections conducted under the FPP voting system, from 1969 to 1993, representation in parliament was dominated by the two major parties, Labour and National. The MMP voting system, introduced in 1996, has seen the combined vote share of the two major parties decrease by about ten percentage points, but has more than doubled the vote share of those minor parties achieving representation in parliament.

For example, over the nine elections conducted under FPP voting system, from 1969 to 1993, the National Party averaged 41.7% of the vote while the Labour Party averaged 41.4%. Over the nine elections conducted under the MMP voting system, from 1996 to 2020, the National Party has averaged 37.1% of the party vote which compares to the 35.9% average for the Labour Party.

However, the total vote share for the minor parties gaining representation in parliament has more than doubled under MMP compared to FPP elections – from an average of 8.5% over the FPP elections from 1969 to 1993 to an average of 22.5% under MMP elections from 1996 to 2020. In 2020 the three minor parties gaining parliamentary representation obtained well below this average at 16.6% share of the party vote; this is the second lowest (after 2017) combined share of the party vote for the minor parties in any MMP election.

Across the nine MMP elections to date, for the other current parliamentary parties who have contested more than one election, the average party vote share has been: 7.5% for the Green Party; 3.9% for ACT New Zealand; and 1.6% for Te Paati Māori.

Figure 2 shows that the Labour Party's share of the vote in 2020 (50.01%) is not only the highest it has achieved under MMP elections to date, but also higher than any election since 1969. In fact, in only two elections in Labour's history has the party achieved a better result – the 1938 election (55.8%) and the 1946 election (51.3%).

For the National Party the 2020 election was its worst result since 2002, and the second-worst result in the party's history. The National Party's best election result under MMP was achieved in 2011 with 47.3% of the vote; in only four other elections in National's history has the party achieved a better result – 1946 (48.4%), 1949 (51.9%), 1951 (54.0%), and 1990 (47.8%).

Figure 2: Party vote share of parties represented in Parliament: 1969-2020