

No clear winner in New Zealand election

John Braddock, Tom Peters
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The New Zealand election on Saturday delivered an inconclusive result, with neither the incumbent National Party nor the main opposition Labour Party in a clear position to form a government. The outcome is likely to be decided by whichever is able to strike a deal with the right-wing, anti-Asian New Zealand First.

According to provisional results, National remains the largest party with 46 percent of the vote and 58 seats, two seats down on 2014. Labour has 35.8 percent (45 seats), NZ First 7.5 percent (9 seats), and the Greens 5.9 percent (7 seats). ACT with 0.5 percent has one seat by virtue of an electorate deal with National. Labour and the Greens, who campaigned as potential coalition partners, have a combined total of 43 percent.

Based on the current figures, a Labour-Green-NZ First government would command a majority of just 61 to 59. An estimated 384,000 special votes, including those cast overseas, 15 percent of the total, will not be counted until October 7.

On Saturday night, NZ First leader Winston Peters boasted, “We hold all the main cards.” He refused to answer questions about which party he would ally with. Peters has previously formed coalitions with National, from 1996–98, and Labour from 2005–08, the latter rewarding him with the post of foreign minister. NZ First ran a Trump-style campaign based on national protectionism, rabid anti-Asian xenophobia and calls for a massive cut to immigration.

Concerned about political instability, the corporate media has signalled its preference for a National-NZ First coalition. The *Sunday Star Times* insisted that Peters has “no choice.” “The voting public,” it warned, “cannot, and will not tolerate him abusing his kingmaker position” by supporting Labour when it trails National by 12 points. The paper’s front page highlighted Prime Minister Bill English’s assertion that he has the “moral authority” to lead National into government for a fourth consecutive term.

Labour leader Jacinda Ardern and Green Party leader James Shaw, however, have both declared they will try

and form a coalition with NZ First.

The result reveals the same over-riding tendencies in recent elections in the US, Australia and France: widespread alienation and disaffection with the entire political establishment. Despite strenuous efforts to promote increased voter participation, the official turnout of 78.8 percent of registered voters was just above the 2014 figure of 77.9 percent. In that election, more than a million people either abstained or did not register.

The main feature of the campaign was the desperate attempt to divert widespread social opposition into safe parliamentary channels. This required a concerted operation to stave off the collapse of the Labour Party, which was polling at an historic low of 23 percent in July. The media, trade unions and pseudo-left groups sought to whip up support for Labour and its new leader Ardern, installed in August, based on bogus claims that the party would address the deepening social crisis facing working people.

Ardern, however, made no significant appeal to the working class. She rejected being called a “socialist,” instead saying she was a “progressive” and a “pragmatist.”

In the face of widespread anti-war sentiment, Ardern supported English’s decision to send more New Zealand troops to Afghanistan. Both leaders refused to rule out joining a catastrophic US-led war against North Korea. Ardern repeatedly reassured big business that a Labour-led government would not increase taxes to address the worsening social disaster, including homelessness, the soaring cost of living and the crisis in the health system

The surge in support for Labour, particularly among youth and students, did not reach the level predicted. The party’s vote rose to 36 percent from 25 percent in 2014, its worst result in 92 years. Much of the increase came from the Greens, whose support dropped from 10.7 to 5.9 percent. NZ First was polling at 13 percent before Ardern’s elevation, but ended on 7.5 percent, a point below its 2014 result.

Labour gained support from layers of the upper middle

class, while losing votes in some of its strongholds. The Labour Party candidate for Ohariu, Greg O'Connor, a former police union head, took the wealthy Wellington electorate from National's coalition partner United Future. Meanwhile in the nearby "safe" working-class seat of Hutt South, Labour's candidate and party vice president Ginny Andersen lost by over 2,000 votes to National's Chris Bishop.

The most significant shift among working-class voters towards Labour occurred in the seven Maori electorates which Labour won by decisive margins. Labour had historically dominated the seats until inroads were made over the last 15 years by the Maori nationalist Maori Party and Mana, which postured as representing an "independent Maori voice." In fact, both outfits represent the interests of a highly privileged layer who control \$NZ40 billion in Maori business assets, while the majority of Maori remain highly oppressed and marginalised.

The Maori Party, which has been in coalition with National since 2008 and helped implement its austerity measures, received just 1.1 percent of the vote, and lost its two remaining MPs. Mana's leader, Hone Harawira, who lost his seat in 2014, failed to regain it. Mana, falsely championed in previous elections by pseudo-left groups as "pro-poor" and "anti-capitalist," is now a moribund organisation.

Labour failed to increase its support in a number of Auckland's urban working-class seats. The opposition parties' campaign to scapegoat Asian migrants for the housing crisis, low wages and unemployment, coupled with demands for cutting immigration by more than 40 percent, was decisively rejected.

For the past five years, Labour, the Greens, Mana and the trade unions have largely adopted NZ First's anti-immigrant politics in order to divide the working class along racial lines, while lining up with Washington's preparations for war against China.

More than a quarter of New Zealand's population is immigrant, heavily concentrated in the Auckland region. An article by *Newsroom* pointed out that Labour made little headway in Auckland, performing worst in those seats with a high number of migrants.

In New Lynn, Labour's support declined by 500 votes between 2014 and 2017. In nearby Te Atatu, Labour's campaign chair Phil Twyford, infamous in 2015 for blaming ballooning house prices on people with "Chinese sounding names," saw his majority cut by several hundred.

The final days of the election campaign were dominated by a witch-hunt against National Party MP Jian Yang and several other politicians based on wild and unsubstantiated accusations that they are "Chinese Communist Party" agents. The McCarthyite campaign, which appears to have involved individuals close to US and Australian intelligence agencies, is intended to shift New Zealand politics into closer alignment with the US preparations for war against China.

On September 19, NZ First, now being courted by both major parties, demanded a "special commission" to investigate "China's impact on our democracy." Peters echoed Trump and Obama's hypocritical denunciation of Chinese "expansionism," which has been the pretext for a major US military build-up against China.

The *Daily Blog*, funded by several trade unions, supports this pro-imperialist campaign. Following the election it declared, "National's total acquiescence to Chinese business interests... will quickly become the major issue."

The next government, whatever its composition, will inevitably come into conflict with the working class as it continues to impose austerity while diverting billions of dollars to the military, strengthening ties with the US and promoting nationalism and xenophobia to prepare the country for war.

Attend the Socialist Equality Group public meeting in Wellington on Sunday October 1: "After the election, the way forward in the fight against war"

The authors also recommend:

No to war and social inequality! For world socialism!
Statement of the Socialist Equality Group on the New Zealand election
[19 September 2017]



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