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# New Zealand General Election

Update

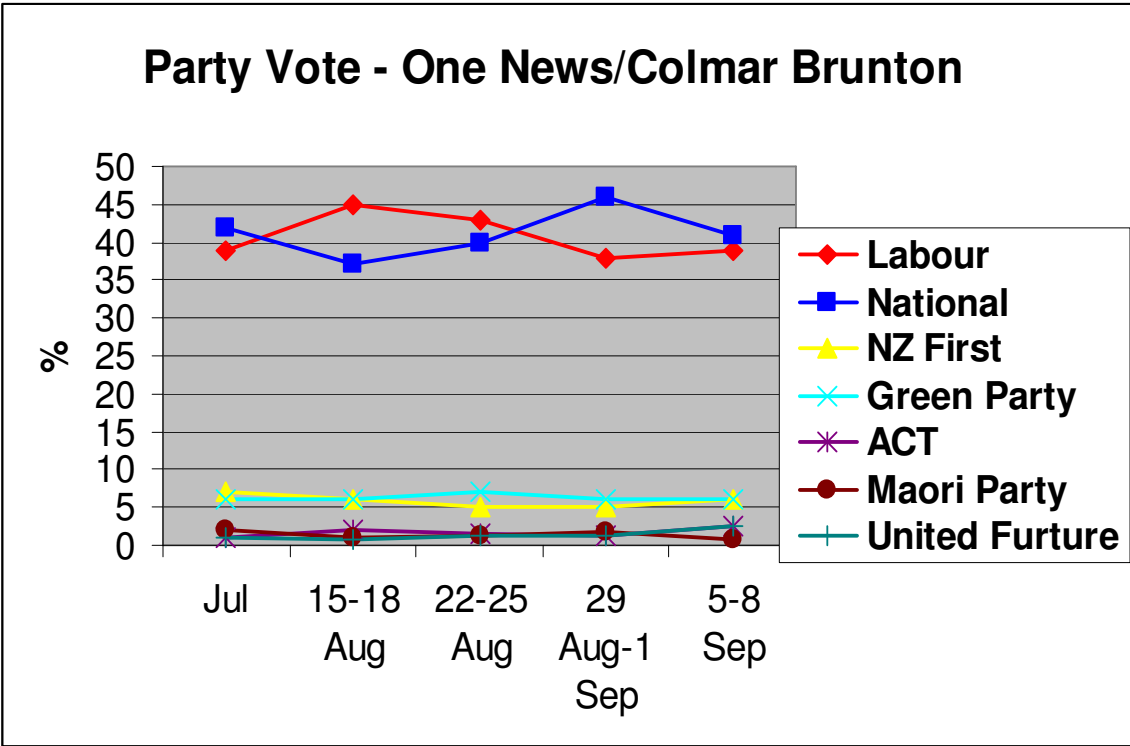
13 September 2005

**NZ Election Update**

The New Zealand general election is to be held this weekend, after a long campaign.

In the final week of the campaign, the election looks to be a very close call. Prime Minister Helen Clark is still well ahead of National Party Leader Don Brash as preferred PM. Last week's NZ Herald Digi-Poll had Ms Clark's rating up 1.9% to 54.7% while Dr Brash was down 2.4% to 32.4%.

However, the latest polls on the Party Vote have Labour and National neck and neck.



The latest One News poll (above) has National ahead on 41 percent and Labour on 39 percent.

At the same time, the latest NZ Herald poll has Labour ahead on 42.1 percent and National on 38.5 percent.

## Key Messages

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In the final week of the campaign, it is likely that Ms Clark and Dr Brash will re-focus on their central campaign messages. For Ms Clark these are credibility, leadership and trust. Dr Brash's key themes have been tax cuts and issues surrounding the Treaty of Waitangi.

## Tax Cuts

Taxation has become a central issue of the campaign and one that highlighted the ideological differences in the policies of the two major parties. Both Labour and National have campaigned on tax cuts. Labour's policies have focused on targeted tax relief for low income families while the National party have proposed across the board tax cuts.

The National tax policy has been criticised as inflationary while the Labour Government has been accused of excessive taxation.

Some recent commentary has observed that in this election campaign "bribes have spoken louder than policy" (Denis Welch, *NZ Listener*) with voters responding more to what's in it for them than to broader social policies. A poll in late August showed that 51 percent of respondents favoured the tax cuts proposed by National while 38 percent thought Labour's policy was preferable.

The most recent tax cut announced by National is a five percent cut to the petrol tax for six months. Dr Brash claims this will be funded largely by the government windfall that has accrued from rising fuel prices. While New Zealand's fuel prices are at an unprecedented high, Labour claims there is no significant windfall for government and that the National policy would affect their ability to deliver in other policy areas. Unsurprisingly, a Herald-DigiPoll survey found that 77.1 percent of respondents supported the petrol tax cut.

## Credibility

The issue of credibility may be a damaging one for Don Brash and National in the last week of the campaign.

Recently, an anonymous smear campaign was launched against the Labour Government and the Greens through a series of leaflets. Initially, Dr Brash claimed no knowledge of the leaflets' origins. However, it has been revealed that it was orchestrated by a far-right religious group called the Exclusive Brethren and that this was known to Dr Brash. The Exclusive Brethren have spent over half a million dollars on the leaflet campaign which has bolstered the National campaign. Members of the Exclusive Brethren have also worked as volunteers on the National campaign.

Also going to the issue of credibility is the National Party's engagement of Australian adviser, Mark Textor, to conduct the party's polling. Mr Textor was discredited in 1996 when it was revealed he was involved in push-polling for the Liberal Party in Australia. In New Zealand, the Labour Party have accused National of the same dirty tactics, though National's general manager Steven Joyce has denied this.

The Australian link has also been made by the Greens who revealed that the anti-Greens leaflet distributed by

the Exclusive Brethren is almost identical to the ones released in Tasmania during the federal election campaign last year. The Exclusive Brethren's international leader, Bruce Hales, is based in Sydney. The church also backed the re-election of George W. Bush in the United States and John Howard in Australia.

In late August leaked faxes and emails revealed that the right-wing minor party Act and the Business Roundtable had provided advice and political strategy to Don Brash.

Helen Clark's suggestions that under a National Government, Don Brash would look to resurrect the so-called "new right agenda" may be given some ammunition by these revelations of those behind the National campaign.

## **Minor Parties**

The close campaign has meant that the minor parties are struggling to get media attention and are unlikely to poll well in Saturday's election.

There has been some confusion as to which of the major parties New Zealand First, generally the most significant of the minor parties, would support. Some had thought that party leader Winston Peters intended to give support in terms of confidence and supply to the largest bloc of parties which, with the support of the Progressives and Greens, would probably be Labour.

However, Mr Peters has clarified his statements, declaring he will support the biggest single party, not bloc of parties. Polling strongly, this is potentially in the National Party's favour. They generally see the support of New Zealand First as their best chance of securing government.

Winston Peters is very clear about one point – New Zealand First will not go into a formal coalition with either national or Labour.



## Hawker Britton

Hawker Britton was founded in 1997 by Bruce Hawker and David Britton, former chief of staff and senior media adviser respectively to Premier Bob Carr. From its initial office in Sydney, has grown in the ensuing six years to have five offices in Australia; Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Brisbane, and three located internationally; Washington, Wellington and London.

Hawker Britton is Australia's only national and international public affairs company providing advice on managing government relations, strategic communications and campaigns.

The firm boasts a wide range of clients in a variety of industries, including banking and finance, film and entertainment, information technology and telecommunications, primary industries, property development, health care and health technology, transport and infrastructure, construction and mining, water and environment, sport, hospitality and gaming.

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Hawker Britton brings to the corporate boardroom a unique approach to strategy and campaigns, borne out of corporate and political experience. Our specialist consultants are drawn from the ranks of former ministers, members of parliament, chiefs of staff, and senior policy and media advisers. Corporate clients appreciate our political and strategic communications heritage and the value that it brings to corporate planning.

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