

Down, Down, Down: Turnout in New Zealand from 1946 to the 2011 Election

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ABSTRACT

Electoral turnout in New Zealand exhibits a linear downward trend over the last half-century, with only a few exceptional elections as outliers. As turnout habits are 'sticky', such a trend will be hard to reverse. This paper first analyses the time series of macro-data from 1946. Building on previous longitudinal analysis of the extant survey data, it also uses data from the 2011 NZES to explore the most recent individual-level patterns.

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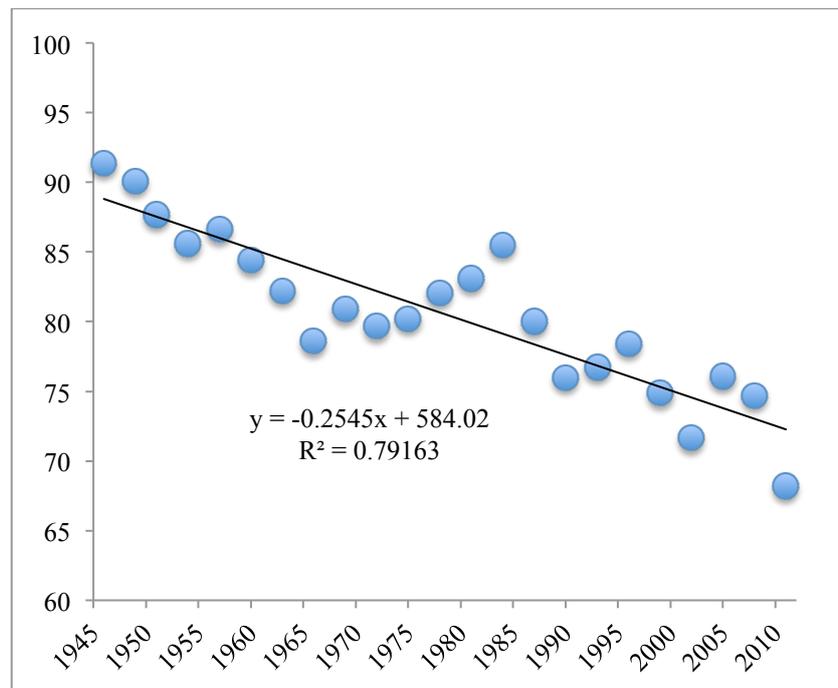
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1. Introduction

The 2011 Election in New Zealand was notable for its very low voter turnout. One commentator declared the relative absence of voters in the polling booths as ‘the saddest day for democracy in New Zealand’ (TV3, 2011). Simon Collins in the *New Zealand Herald* declared dramatically that ‘one million didn't bother to vote’ (Collins, 2011). To find a New Zealand election with lower official turnout than 2011, one must go back to 1887, well before when women attained voting rights. New Zealand turnout in 2011 was the lowest ever experienced in the country under conditions of full adult suffrage.

International analysts often respond to news of declining turnout in New Zealand by making the point that the fall has been from a level of much higher achievement, particularly in the 1940s and 1950s, and that current levels remain acceptable by the standards of many other democracies. But New Zealand voter turnout in 2011 was also low in the context of comparison with countries of a similar population and democratic history. Admittedly, New Zealand’s turnout in 2011 was still superior to that in the United States (2008 and 2012), the United Kingdom (2010), and Canada (2011). However, New Zealand’s turnout in 2011 was lower than that at recent elections in the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Italy, Greece, Sweden, and Denmark (International IDEA, 2012).

Figure 1: Age-Eligible Turnout in New Zealand and the Passage of Time



The pattern of change in turnout since 1946 in New Zealand is also of some concern. Figure 1 above based on turnout on a base of the age-eligible population indicates a very consistent downward trend with a tight fit around the trend or regression line. Only from 1975 until 1984 was there a consistent pattern of reversal over more than two consecutive elections.

Most discussion of data on turnout in New Zealand is based on the official turnout rate, a proportion of all who voted on the base of the electoral rolls including those who cast informal or invalid ballots. In 2011, this figure was 74.2 percent.

To measure New Zealand electoral turnout consistently over time, the official turnout figures are insufficiently robust. This is because the coverage of the electoral rolls has varied considerably, and in recent years has rarely moved above 93 or 94 per cent. The more comprehensive the roll, the lower the official turnout is likely to be. Turnout needs to be measured on an age-eligible basis to compare it

accurately over time. Age-eligible turnout was estimated back to 1928 by Nagel (1988) and has been calculated on a base of enrolment target estimates by electoral administrators in New Zealand since 1990. Once one estimates turnout on an age-eligible base, a longer pattern of decline stands out: it is not simply a pattern since the 1980s. Turnout decline began earlier, with the period 1975 to 1984 marking only a brief reversal. On an age-eligible base or denominator, and choosing instead valid votes as the numerator in the calculation, turnout in 2011 was 68.2 per cent.

While there is a debate among researchers into turnout about whether one should use official or age-eligible turnout, New Zealand's voting eligibility requirements make age-eligible turnout less vulnerable to error than in most other countries (Nagel 1988; Massicote, Blais and Yoshinaka, 2004, 15-39). This is because New Zealand gives voting rights to non-citizens after they have been permanent residents in New Zealand for a year. Increases in immigration in recent years from countries that do not share New Zealand's experience of democratic politics could perhaps explain a small part of the recent decline, a hypothesis to be tested below.

2. The International Literature

The international literature on electoral turnout has made significant progress over the past twenty years. Important sources include Franklin (2004); Lyons and Alexander (2000); Blais, Gidengil, Nevitte and Nadeau, (2004). The 'Civic Voluntarism' model also remains a major reference point because of the depth of its analysis of political participation in the American context (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). Put simply, it postulates that people do not vote because 'they can't, don't want to, or weren't asked': in other words, that people may lack resources to

vote because of their social situation, that people may be psychologically or attitudinally disposed not to vote, or that candidates or political parties may have failed to mobilise them to vote. Anthony Downs' economic theory of voting is also indispensable. Even though it predicts far more nonvoting than it is normally the case, its identification of three key concepts is hard to avoid when thinking about turnout (Downs, 1957). These are (c) the costs of voting (which includes the collection of information to underpin a choice), the benefits from the vote if one's candidate or party were to win according to a rationally self interested utility-maximising calculus (b), and the probability of a vote having an effect (p). The simple formula $c + (b \cdot p)$ expresses the probability of a person casting a vote, the idea being that people weigh the benefits they might gain if their candidate or party wins against the probability that their vote might be pivotal.

Accounting for turnout takes place at two levels: the context and nature of the election itself, and the behaviour of individuals within it.

Among Individuals

The main 'blocks' of relevant variables at the individual-level are demographic and social; voter mobilization; psychology and 'habit', and age, both in terms both of the life-cycle and generations or 'age cohorts'. There is some debate in the literature about the implications of low turnout. Various theoretical models and empirical analyses assert that the lower the turnout, the more it tends to be shaped significantly by variations among individuals in terms of socio-economic status: in particular income and education. A link between 'resources' shaped by people's social location is well-established in the literature, although there is variation by country (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995; Nevitte, Blais, Gidengil, and Nadeau 2009). Going somewhat further, there may be linkage between low turnout and increasing levels of

social inequality in several advanced democracies (Boix 2003; Solt 2008), although the direction of causality may be difficult to pin down because both tendencies could be reinforcing each other. Other research questions this claim, seeking to show that there is no evidence of a link between inequality and low turnout (Stockemer and Scruggs 2012).

Turnout can of course be significantly affected by efforts to mobilize voters on the part of political parties and candidates, also well rehearsed in the civic voluntarism model (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Vowles 2002). Turnout is also shaped by psychological characteristics, including interest in politics, and by ‘habit’. The more (or less) people have a habit of voting, the more (or less) they are likely to vote. While apparently obvious, this finding has major implications: voting (and nonvoting) are ‘sticky’: as a habit, this behavior becomes entrenched and resistant to change even where conditions that may have shaped the initial behavior may have changed.

Turnout is affected by age in two distinct ways. Younger people are normally less likely to vote than older people, and become more likely to vote as they grow older. And there is evidence in several countries including New Zealand that different generations and ‘age cohorts’ differ in their propensity to vote or not vote.

Election Characteristics

Each election has its own character. Much immediate post-election commentary identified evidence from campaign polling that the margin between the two major parties was so wide prior to the 2011 election that there were almost universal expectations of a National-led government. As John Key put it, ‘I think a lot of our voters sat back and thought “they are a lot more in front. They will win.”’ (One News, 2011). But the same could have applied to Labour voters who, perceiving their party

so far behind in the polls, may have been discouraged from voting. Such a scenario plays nicely into the economic model's focus on the probability of a vote having an effect.

As it happens, while voter expectations are shaped by campaign polling, there is evidence that they are also shaped by the closeness of the previous election. And under New Zealand's mixed member system, the margins between electorate candidates could matter too, although not as much as they did under the old first-past-the-post system. In general then, the closer the competition for office, the more likely that people will vote. If the election result is an apparently foregone conclusion, this will depress turnout.

The ideological gap between the major parties, in both left-right and other terms, may also have a role to play. The more an election is seen to 'matter', the higher the turnout (Franklin, 2004). If the main political alternatives put to voters in party programmes are meaningful and different, this is likely to enhance turnout.

To focus in more detail on the New Zealand literature, building on earlier less systematic analysis (Vowles 1994; 2002), Vowles (2010) conducted analysis of New Zealand election survey data from the 1963, 1975, 1981 elections, and those from 1987 until 2005, combining both individual and election-contextual data. Findings were as follows. Individuals' propensity to vote or not was found to be shaped more by closeness at the electorate-level under FPP, and at the national level under the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) System.

Overall turnout was no higher under the MMP system than it would have been under FPP, although there was some very weak evidence that younger voters were more likely to vote and older voters less likely to vote as a result of electoral

system change. There were differences between generations in their propensity to vote, more recent generations being less likely to do so.

Standard demographics and socio-economic factors had the expected effects, with those not born in New Zealand being less likely to vote than those who were 'native'. Frequent electoral boundary changes have had negative effects on turnout under MMP, although probably because in the early years of the new system these were more frequent than they were under FPP, and party organizations are now weaker and less able to reorganize effectively on the basis of those changes than they were under the old system.

Turnout levels at the time when people first get the opportunity to vote appeared to affect their propensity to turn out later, but there are also changes in turnout behaviour throughout the life-cycle. Contrary to research findings elsewhere (Plutzer 2002, Franklin 2004) the New Zealand data does not indicate that the habit of voting is entirely established over the first three elections at which people become eligible to vote: some evidence suggests that it can also be gained and lost throughout the life-cycle (Vowles 2010).

While useful in identifying important relationships between characteristics and contexts on turnout, a model of turnout at the individual-level has relatively weak explanatory and predictive power. It can only explain a small part of individual behaviour in turnout across elections. This is to be expected. Many decisions to vote or not vote are spur-of-the-moment and arbitrary. However, out of a chaotic mixture of unpredictable behaviour, patterns do emerge and when individual behaviour becomes aggregated into collective behaviour, these patterns are what shape overall change over time at the margins, where change is inevitably measured.

To fully capture the aggregate effects of these marginal changes, analysis needs to focus on the collective behaviour embodied in elections over time: in particular, since 1946, before which a combination of the Depression and World War II shook up voting patterns. By 1946, a particular pattern of New Zealand electoral politics was set, which forms the best baseline for analysis.

A time series model of turnout across elections since 1946 using the official election data and other sources can identify the marginal effects of the contextual variables. Simply put, as theory predicts, close elections at which the two major parties posed clear policy alternatives enhance turnout, while elections where the outcome is not in doubt and where party policies closely converge produce low turnout. The variables that largely explain turnout changes are therefore:

- i) the competitiveness of the two-party race at the current election (time t). The actual election results are used to estimate this figure. The last polls taken before the election would be a better indicator, but because they differ so little from the election results the more easily accessible official data is used;
- ii) the competitiveness of the two-party race at the previous election ($t-1$);
- iii) the extent of the left-right ideological gap between the two main parties at the current election as measured by content analysis of party manifestos (Gibbons 2011);
- iv) the proportion of freshly eligible voters by age. This figure is then interacted with competitiveness at the previous election. Simply put, the two are multiplied, enabling analysis of the combined effects of the two variables together, compared with the effects of each variable on its own.

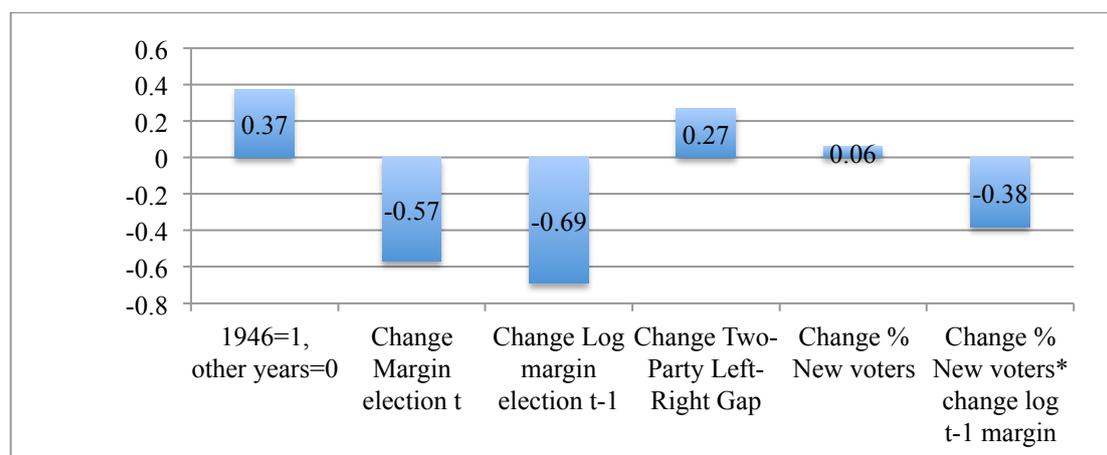
Because of the trend and thus the ‘non-stationary’ nature of the turnout data, as econometrics textbooks recommend a model based on turnout change between one election and the next is employed. It includes a ‘dummy variable’ for the 1946 election, to account for the unique nature of an election immediately post-war, and the effective ‘re-setting’ of a degree of ‘normal politics’ after a period of change. As a result one would expect to see an increase in turnout in that year, and that indeed was the case.

Competitiveness at the previous election is estimated by the change in the log of the margin between the two main parties. The change in the percentage of new voters is also interacted with the log of the t-1 margin. This indicates that new voters are particularly sensitive to the competitiveness of the race at the election prior to that at which they first became eligible to vote. Logging the data reduces the distance between the competitiveness data points as the difference between the parties’ vote shares increases. This is based on the assumption that while voters remember the previous election, they remember the details less well and while a clear sense of ‘closeness’ can be retained, the distinction between ‘not close’ and ‘not at all close’ becomes much weaker.

Various less well-fitting iterations of this model have been tested using alternative specifications, alternative competitiveness variables based on multi-party estimates, a lagged dependent variable, official turnout as the dependent variable, and a host of other possible effects. Among additional variables tested with null or very minor effects were: electoral system; proportions of the eligible voters in particular age cohorts; government time in office; change versus no change of government; pre- and post-polling contexts (1970 being the dividing year); and Prime Minister in office.

Figure 2 displays the standardized estimates for each explanatory variable contributing to the model, the area covered by each bar indicating its relative importance in shaping turnout. A report of further details of the model can be found in the Appendix. If the bar is above the 0 line the effect is positive, if below, it is negative. Competitiveness is measured in terms of distance between the two major parties' vote shares, not closeness, so the effect is negative. One can note that the effect of ideological distance is relatively weak, although still worth attention. This may well reflect the difficulty of capturing voter perceptions of distance from party manifesto data. The other point to note is the interaction between new voters and competitiveness: this suggests that when elections are close, as many new voters cast ballots as 'old' ones. But when elections are not close, new voters are most adversely affected.

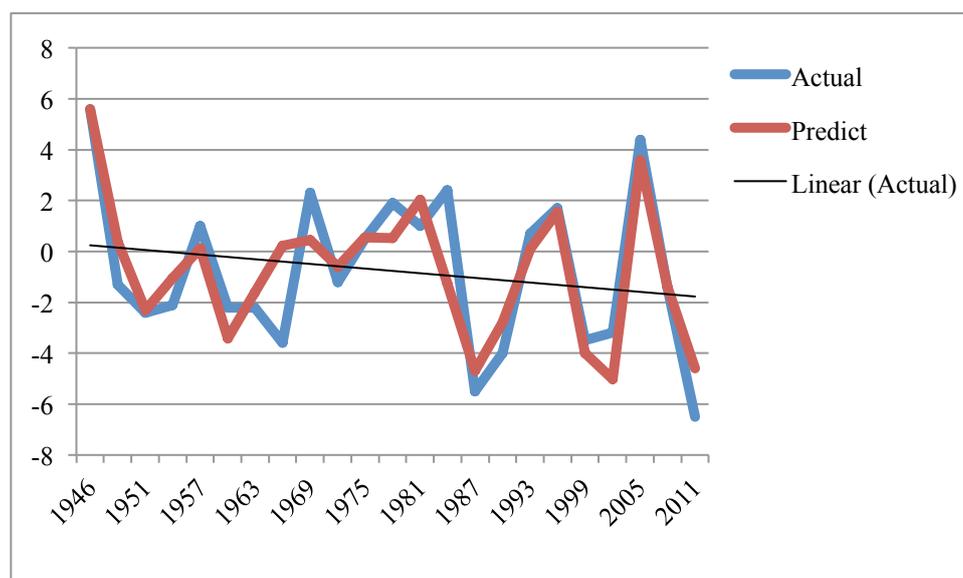
Figure 2: Comparing the Effects of Factors That Affected Turnout Change, 1946-2011



NOTE: The overall model predicts almost 2/3 of the change in turnout over the period (See Appendix)

Figure 3 plots the model's predicted turnout and the actual turnout at each election. The actual turnout change data itself displays a downward trend. In conjunction with individual-level evidence that voting or nonvoting is habitual behaviour, this suggests that turnout decline is 'in-built', with each shift downwards making it more and more difficult to reverse the process other than on a temporary basis. Looking more closely at the extent to which the two lines are in parallel, the Figure reveals quite a close correspondence for most elections.

Figure 3: Actual and Predicted Turnout Change in New Zealand, 1946-2011



Where the correspondence is less, there must be other characteristics of those elections of which the model does not take into account. In 1966 actual turnout is much lower than predicted turnout. A feature of the 1966 election was the recovery in the Social Credit vote that had steadily fallen back since the party's first appearance in 1954. One would have expected a turnout increase with the rise of the new party. If the Social Credit vote was one of 'protest', as many contemporary commentators assumed, perhaps a low turnout was another form of that disaffection. In 1984, by contrast, the model fails to predict the extent of a turnout increase. In this case, it is

easier to think through the discrepancy: this was an election at which an unpopular government was finally defeated, in combination with another third party surge in the form of Bob Jones' New Zealand Party. There is another wide gap between actual and predicted turnout for the 2011 election. For this reason, analysis proceeds into a closer look at the individual-level data for that election.

3. Turnout in 2011: How Low Can We Go?

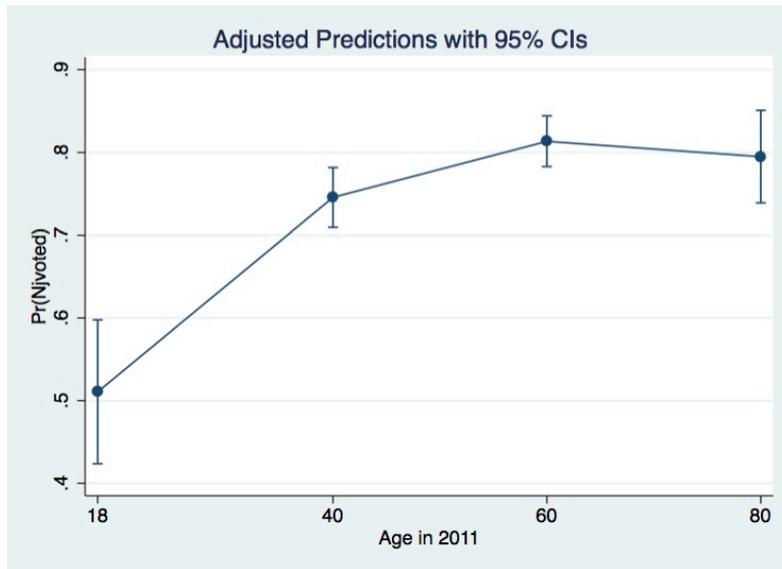
The New Zealand Election Study (NZES) generates validated survey data that accurately reports turnout for its respondents because it is checked against the marked master rolls. It also oversamples some groups prone to low turnout - the youngest age band, and those in the Maori electorates. The response rate for those freshly sampled is 40 per cent and the total validated N is 3099. The sample also contains respondents from the 2005 and 2008 election studies, in which sample attrition applies: at about 1/3 for each election. As expected there is also a correlation between response and propensity to vote, so nonvoters are under-represented among respondents, making up about 12 per cent: just under half of the figure reported in the official roll data from which the sample is taken. However, this is sufficient for analysis and the data is weighted to bring the oversampled groups into line with their population distributions and to adjust upward the nonvoter subsample. One limitation does have to be noted: because the NZES sample is drawn from the electoral rolls, it excludes those not registered and thus for the survey data one returns to the world of official rather than age-eligible turnout. In the case of a single election cross-sectional study, this is not a serious problem. More details on the NZES can be found in the Appendix.

First, we examine the effects of competitiveness at the electorate level, age, and an index of wealth and assets on vote or not vote on a zero-order or bivariate basis with no controls. The next step is to enter those variables with other social structural and demographic factors into a multivariate model. Following that, a series of other variables are added into a final comprehensive model.

The first line of enquiry is competitiveness. While it is impossible to address the difference in the party vote margin between the two main parties in 2011 compared to that in other elections, one can examine turnout across the electorate seats, using the margin between the candidates coming first and second. However the difference in turnout between electorates on the basis of electorate-vote competitiveness is extremely small: at most, about three per cent from the least to the most competitive electorate, so small that it is not worth displaying graphically or entering into the multivariate model reported below. The logic of a mixed-member proportional system in which the party vote makes all votes worth the same across the whole country appeared to be quite well understood in 2011.

Scrutiny of turnout at one election makes it impossible to distinguish between the two aspects of age effects: life-cycle and generational. Figure 4 plots the effects of age on the probability of voting, as derived from a logit model in which age and the square of age are regressed against vote and nonvote. The square of age captures the curvilinear nature of voting, in which both the young and the very old are less likely to vote.

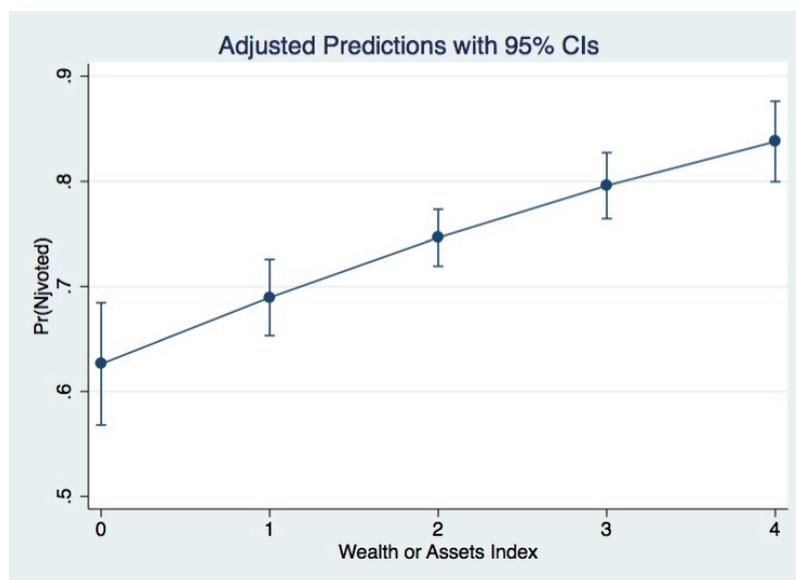
Figure 4 The Effects of Age on Turnout, 2011 Election



NOTE: From a bivariate logistic regression of vote/nonvote against age and age squared.

As part of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), the NZES included a new question designed to indirectly estimate respondents' wealth or assets. Until now, most research on the relationship between turnout and inequality has relied on respondents' reporting of income, education, and occupational data.

Figure 5 Wealth and Assets and Turnout, 2011 Election



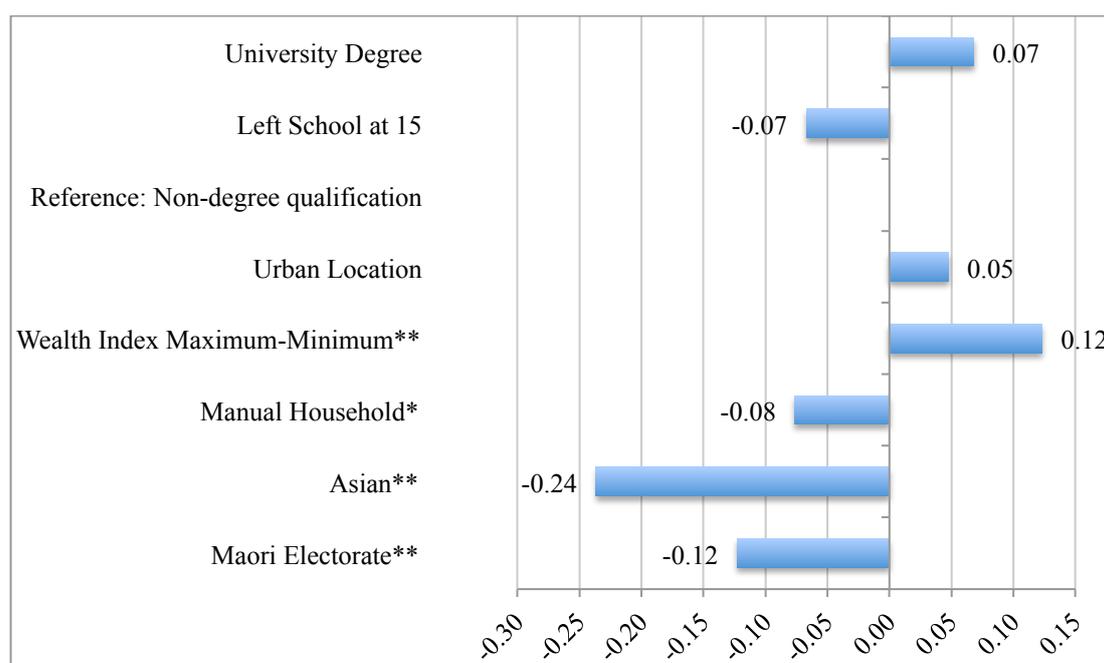
NOTE: From bivariate logit regression of vote/nonvote against the wealth/assets index.

The wealth or assets index is made up of four questions: do respondents own a house, a business, stocks and shares, and have any savings? Like income, it is likely that some respondents do not report their status, and because of the self-completion nature of the survey it is difficult to distinguish between those who might have answered yes and those who might have answered 'no'. On the assumption that all missing values and 'don't know' responses are more likely to reflect 'no' than yes, all of these were coded to zero. The resulting index when regressed against the probability of vote or nonvote is therefore a conservative estimate of the effects of wealth and assets on turnout. As can be easily seen, and despite the conservatism of our treatment of missing values, in Figure 5 the slope of the line and the confidence intervals around it indicate that there was a substantial and significant effect of wealth on turnout at the 2011 election.

Age and wealth are perhaps the most theoretically salient social and demographic variables associated with turnout but of course there are numerous other 'suspects'. Examination now turns to further factors, now placing them into a multivariate model that also contains electorate competitiveness, age, and the wealth and assets index. Full details on this model can be found in the Appendix. A number of alternative variables were included that theoretical or empirical research has identified as correlates of voting and not voting. These were gender, income, other ethnic groups, union membership, church attendance, receipt of welfare benefits, born outside New Zealand, and employed or not employed. None registered significantly in the multivariate analysis, although several did so to varying degrees on a bivariate basis. Most of these tended to correlate with the variables that remain in the model.

For a long time Maori electorates have had much lower turnout than general electorates: Figure 6 indicates that in 2011 all else equal Maori electorate turnout was 12 points lower than general electorate turnout, even after having controlled for other social structural variables, age, and electorate competitiveness. An alternative variable representing primary identity as Maori did not have such large effects: low Maori turnout is mainly a feature of the Maori electorates.

Figure 6: Social Structure and Turnout in 2011



NOTE: Probability effects of being in each category (except for wealth index, which is maximum-minimum) on vote or not vote, controlling for all variables listed plus age and electorate competitiveness (Model Pseudo-R-Squared=0.08, for further details see Appendix). All variables are significant at $z < 0.10$, * indicates $z < 0.05$, ** $z < 0.01$.

Those primarily identifying as Asian (nearly 5 per cent of the weighted sample) were significantly less likely to vote: 24 per cent less likely to vote when compared to non-Maori in the general electorates after taking account of the effects of the other variables. This is a significant finding and confirms speculation that recent immigration from countries without as strong a commitment to democracy as

New Zealand could be part of an explanation for lower turnout. But roughly speaking, this ‘Asian effect’ would represent somewhere between 1 and 2 percent of overall turnout, only a small part of an explanation for turnout decline.

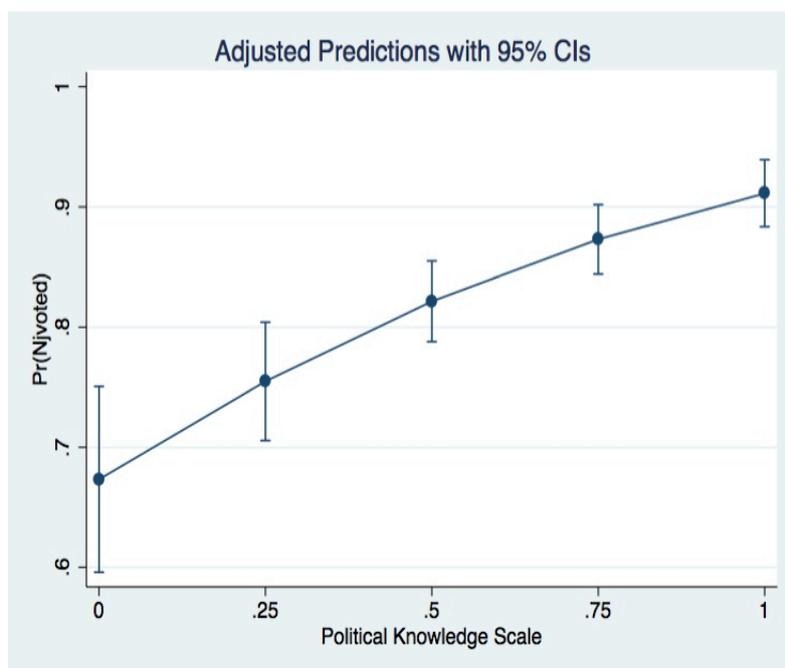
Respondents in households with a person in a manual or service occupation as main income earner were also less likely to vote by a factor of about 8 per cent. At a lower level of significance (but still at 90 per cent), education was associated with turnout in much the way theory predicts: the more education, the higher the likelihood of turnout. Despite controls in the social structure model for the factors already reported, the wealth and assets index continued to have very significant net effects on turnout. Location in a Maori electorate, location in a manual or service household, and the two education variables all tend to correlate with wealth and assets (or their absence). One would expect much of the effect of wealth and assets to be captured by these variables, and about half of that effect indeed is so captured, but despite this the index still has an independent effect on turnout. Urban location (in a town or city 25,000 and above) had an insignificant positive correlation with turnout. Without any controls, urban location had a small but also insignificant negative correlation with voting.

The next step in the model building process is the addition of variables that estimate personal capacities and perceptions, and political parties’ attempts to attract support, both in terms of their policy differences and their attempts to mobilise voters. Much research on turnout now emphasises the importance of political knowledge (Matsusaka 1995; Popkin and Dimmock 1998; Milner 2002; Larcinesse 2007; Fisher, Lessard-Phillips, Hobolt and Curtice, 2008). Those individuals who know more about politics and the world around them in general find it easier to make political choices because they already have a ‘stock’ of information to draw on. Less knowledgeable

people, by contrast, either lack information or have to spend more time seeking it out during an election campaign. In Downsian terms information is a cost of voting, and many people are not prepared to pay it, and consequently feel less confident about going out to vote. Many do not. Political knowledge may be associated with education, but it has an independent effect. Not all highly educated people necessarily have high levels of knowledge about politics and economics, for example.

Figure 7 shows the effects of a scale of political knowledge on the probability of voting, after having taking into account all the other factors so far discussed (including education), plus several others to be discussed below (the full model is Model 2 in the Appendix Table). This scale measures political knowledge by adding up correct answers to four questions: respondents are asked the name of the Minister of Finance, the party that came second in the election, the most recent unemployment figure, and the name of the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

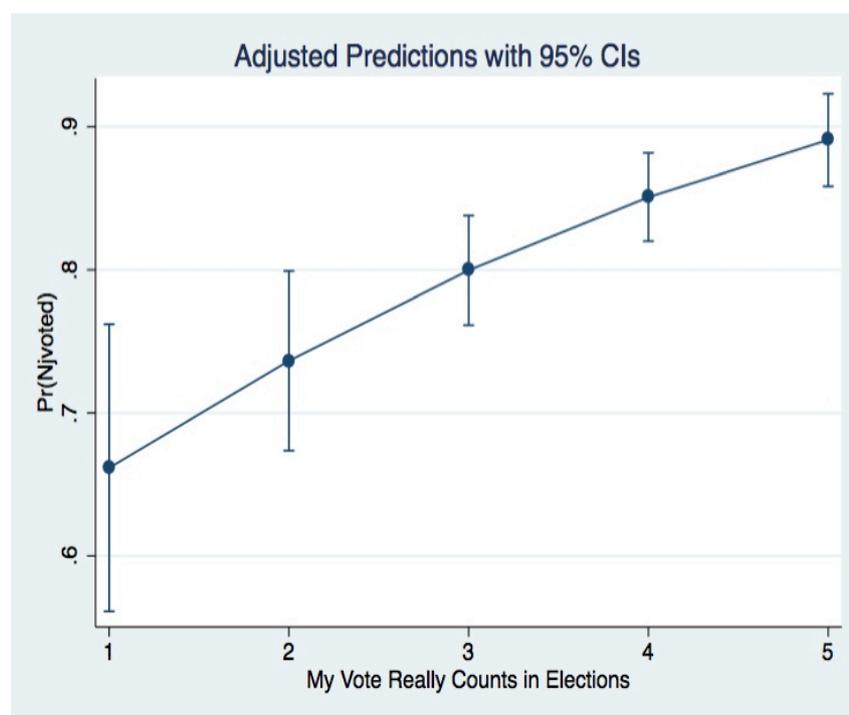
Figure 7 Political Knowledge and the Probability of Voting, 2011 Election



NOTE: After controls for social structure, age, electorate competitiveness, political efficacy, party contact, and perceptions of National/Labour left-right differences.

Those with the highest level of knowledge (15 percent) were somewhat more than 20 per cent more likely to vote than those with the lowest knowledge, who either got all the answers wrong or who did not or could not respond to the questions (11 per cent). The largest group on the knowledge scale were in the middle 0.5 category (31 per cent) followed by the one above (28 per cent).

Figure 8 My Vote Really Counts in Elections and the Probability of Voting



NOTE: After controls for social structure, age, electorate competitiveness, political efficacy, party contact, and perceptions of National/Labour left-right differences.

As noted earlier John Key and a host of commentators claimed in the immediate election aftermath that many people did not vote because they knew National would win by a large margin. A survey of nonvoters on behalf of the Electoral Commission reported that many nonvoters, when asked, gave much the same reason. NZES data confirms this directly, on top of the various other

contributing factors. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a statement on a five-point scale 'My vote really counts in elections'. While only 12 percent disagreed, one might expect the perception that the election was already won to be reflected in responses to the question. Figure 8 shows that a sense of votes not counting did play into a failure to vote or, at least, significantly reduced the probability of voting.

Three other factors also shaped the decision to vote or not vote. The NZES measures political efficacy by a question that asks: *Some people say that no matter who people vote for, it won't make any difference to what happens. Others say that who people vote for can make a big difference to what happens. ... where ONE means that voting won't make any difference to what happens and FIVE means that voting can make a big difference .. where would you place yourself?*

This question is not just about votes 'counting', or making a difference to the result, but by inclusion of the phrase 'what happens' it implies that voting might also shape what those elected might do with their positions. A persons who responds that their vote will make 'a big difference' is expressing a belief in 'external efficacy': that politicians they elect will be responsive to them. Indeed, in 2011 about 48 per cent of New Zealanders in the NZES sample did respond that their votes would make a big difference, worth only 9 per cent placing themselves closer to the 'won't make any difference' response. Those who saw a big difference were about 14 percent more likely to vote than those who saw no difference, again, after controlling for all other factors in play.

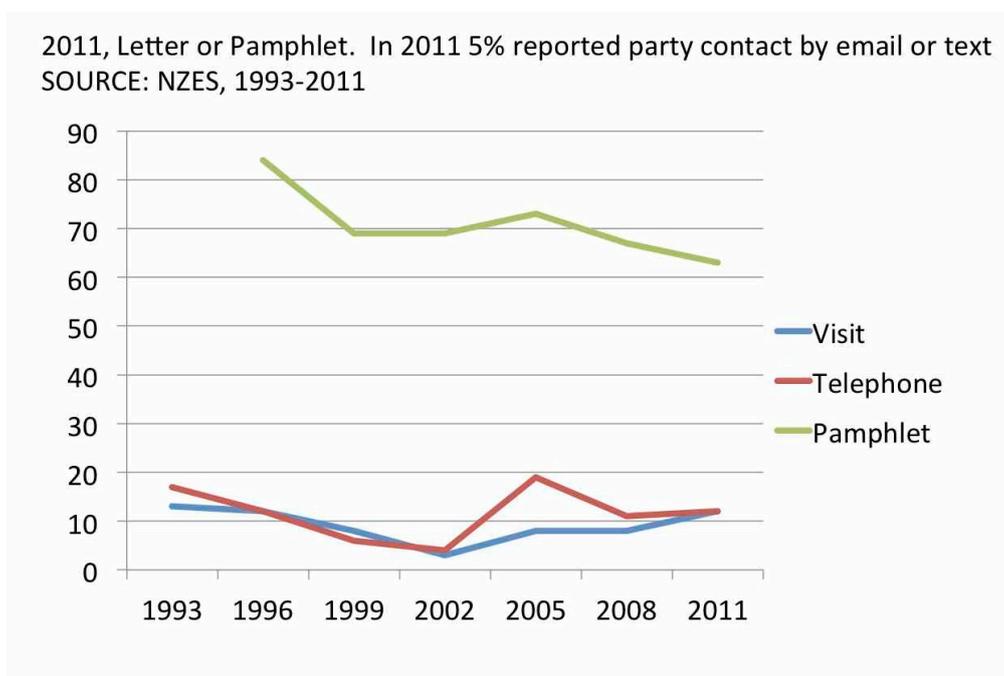
Policy differences between the two major parties have been shown to have effects on turnout across New Zealand elections since 1946. The 2011 NZES confirms this finding at the level of individual voters, which is reassuring. The

difference was not large, but those seeing the largest possible left-right difference between the two parties were about 8 per cent more likely to vote than those who saw no difference: again, after controls for all the other factors mentioned above. This estimate was simply derived from a question which asked respondents to place the two parties on a scale where the most left represented 0 and the most right represented 10. The absolute difference between the two parties scores was then estimated. Alternative scales taking account of left-right policy differences between the eight political parties represented in Parliament did not have significant effects. Again, this is confirmation that National-Labour differences still drive most voter perceptions about competitiveness and policy options.

Finally, what of mobilization? Figure 9 traces the efforts that New Zealand political parties have made to contact voters to persuade them to vote since 1993. While the distribution of pamphlets appears in decline, since a low point in 2002 parties have made a little more effort to make face-to-face contacts, and have indeed maintained a level of face-to-face contact established at the highly competitive 2005 election. Telephone contact has fallen back, unfortunately since contrary to expectations telephone contact, on top of all other factors, made respondents 8 per cent more likely to vote. No other forms of contact had significant effects and, surprisingly, personal visits had a slightly negative effect. Two interpretations of this surprising finding come to mind: either sampling error, or that political parties making personal visits have successfully identified the most recalcitrant nonvoters but party efforts to persuade them to vote are failing. Email and text contact was relatively significant, measured for the first time at about 5 per cent, but had no significant effects on turnout behaviour.

Full results from the statistical models used to generate the figures and estimates included above can be found in the Appendix.

Figure 9 Party Contact at New Zealand Elections 1993-2011



4. Conclusions: Is the Trend Reversible?

The implications of this time series analysis in the first section of this chapter are sobering. Because of the importance of ‘habit’, once in train, turnout decline is hard to stop in the absence of a major intervention such as the adoption of compulsory voting. However, reversal of the process is not impossible and could be affected by the following.

Mass perceptions that election results are closer than at present would enhance turnout. The public may tend to under-estimate the closeness of elections because of a focus on the two main parties and consequently less attention to coalition options because of the campaign’s focus on the two major parties, particularly since the 2005 election. This is a perception encouraged by the National

and Labour parties in 2008 and 2011 by their refusals to debate together with leaders of the smaller parties. Such perceptions are also encouraged when parties fail to form pre-election coalitions, or otherwise fail to signal their coalition preferences. If public perceptions of closeness were constructed on a basis of clearer ‘centre-left’ versus ‘centre-right’ coalitions, one might expect higher turnout.

Turnout might increase on the basis of more consistent and stronger policy differences between the parties on the left-right dimension than those estimated over the last few elections. Differences on other dimensions could also be salient, and more research is needed on the multi-dimensional space occupied by policy differences by New Zealand political parties.

Turnout might increase if there were more activity by political parties in local communities to mobilise people to vote. More local activity, canvassing and contact in general on the part of political parties would greatly assist in voter mobilization (Vowles 2002). U.S. and other evidence indicate that repeated face-to-face door-to-door canvassing remains much the most effective way of mobilizing voters (for example Bergan, Gerber, Green, and Panagopoulos 2005; Niven 2004). Our finding that telephone canvassing was more effective in New Zealand 2011 is encouraging, at one level. Telephone canvassing is more efficient and less labour-intensive than personal canvassing, and if it pays dividends in turnout, parties might wish to move resources in that direction.

Turnout might increase if there were more opportunities and support for public education about political matters might have some effects in the longer term, both in schools, and in post-secondary and adult education, thus boosting general levels of political knowledge. The literature on civic education (Niemi and Junn 1998; Galston 2001; Westheimer 2004; Milner 2002) indicates that while knowledge

of institutions and how they work would form a useful part of such education, people will engage with political education most effectively if it does not avoid matters on which politicians and people disagree, and indeed emphasizes them. However, educational programmes of this nature run the risk of running into political controversy. In addition, political parties would need to play a role in the process for such education to most effectively translate into electoral choices and incentives to vote.

The temporary reversal of New Zealand's turnout decline over the period from 1975 to 1984 indicates that the process can be halted. This was a period of remobilization of party membership and in civic engagement, and ended with a major shift in the generational composition and ideological direction of government in New Zealand. Given the current character of political elites, the nature of the mass media, the distribution of power, wealth, and income, and the state of public opinion, whether a new wave of such change is likely in the near future remains an open question.

Appendix Table 1: OLS Time Series Model of Turnout in New Zealand 1946-2011 (23 Elections)

	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	DW*
	0.866	0.749	0.655	1.79869	2.38
	B	Std. Err.	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	-1.13	0.40		-2.81	0.01
1946=1, other years=0	5.45	1.96	0.37	2.78	0.01
Change in -					
Margin election t	-0.24	0.06	-0.57	-4.17	0.00
Log margin election t-1	-1.74	0.37	-0.69	-4.68	0.00
Two-Party Left-Right Gap	0.05	0.03	0.27	2.00	0.06
% New voters	0.12	0.28	0.06	0.42	0.68
% New voters*log t-1 margin	-0.65	0.28	-0.38	-2.32	0.03

Dependent Variable: Change in age-eligible turnout

*Durbin-Watson=2.38. This falls in the area of an inconclusive test for negative autocorrelation. If this were present, levels of statistical significance could be underestimated, any error therefore being in the direction of a conservative interpretation. However, the test of whether additional variables could be usefully added to the model lay in whether or not they significantly increased the adjusted R².

Appendix Table 2 Model on Turnout, 2011 Election

	1: Social Structure		2: Full Model	
	Coeff	r.s.e	Coeff	r.s.e.
Age 18-100	0.08**	(0.02)	0.05*	(0.02)
Age Squared	0.00*	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)
Maori Electorate	-0.65**	(0.16)	-0.71**	(0.17)
Asian Identity	-1.09***	(0.29)	-1.28***	(0.29)
Manual or Service Household	-0.42**	(0.16)	-0.31*	(0.17)
University Degree	0.41**	(0.21)	0.26	(0.23)
Left School 15 or earlier	-0.36*	(0.19)	-0.30	(0.19)
Wealth Index	0.17***	(0.06)	0.02	(0.06)
Electorate Competitiveness	-0.01*	(0.00)	-0.01	(0.00)
Urban (25,000 plus)	0.27*	(0.16)	0.21	(0.16)
Political Knowledge			1.61***	(0.27)
Voting A Big Difference			0.22***	(0.07)
Vote Really Counts			0.36**	(0.08)
Two-Party Left-Right Difference			0.05**	(0.03)
Telephone Contact			0.73**	(0.29)
Constant	-1.01	(0.52)	-3.07***	(0.60)
Pseudo R ²	0.08		0.17	
Log pseudo-likelihood	-1102.37		-1223.17	
Wald chi ²	122.3***		196.93***	
N	3099		3099	

Logistic regressions with probability weights and robust standard errors (). Data weighted by age, gender, education, and party vote. Probability estimates in Figures and in the body of paper are derived from margins in Stata 12.1.

* significant at $z < 0.10$ **significant at $z < 0.05$ *** significant at $z < 0.01$

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