Media Peripheries

Social media campaigning at the 2020 New Zealand general election

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Abstract

High use of social media by voters and by political parties, which is quantified in this article for the 2020 New Zealand general election, raises the question of how informative parties' social media posts are compared to their other policy statements. Text scraped from Facebook posts was coded using the Manifesto Project's methodology. The positions of parties on the two main dimensions of political competition were broadly similar using social media text and text from manifestos, webpages and opening campaign speeches. However, parties were often more focussed on their core topics on social media than in longer documents, which may make it easier for voters to understand parties' main priorities. Parties also used Facebook to mobilise voters and supporters. Together with earlier research showing the main parties kept the tone of their posts positive and disinformation low, the results discussed here show that parties' social media posts were largely positive for democracy and citizen participation.

Keywords

1. Introduction

This article considers social media use by voters and by political parties during the 2020 New Zealand general election campaign, and how much information was available to voters in parties' Facebook posts. As in other countries, electoral volatility has increased in New Zealand, with more people deciding how to vote according to issues salient at a particular election (Foster and Taylor 2019, p. 16; Vowles 2020a). Although most political information is received through the media (Rudd and Hayward 2009, p. 3), the traditional media have been in decline in New Zealand and elsewhere (D. Williams 2018; Loan et al. 2021). In contrast, social media platforms, such as Facebook, have become more important for political information. In addition, shutdowns caused by Covid-19 and the decision by many people to physically isolate also disrupted traditional face to face campaigning at the 2020 New Zealand general election. This has made social media use by voters and political parties in 2020 worthy of further study.

The debate over whether social media has positive or negative consequences for democracy and citizen participation is discussed in section two. Section three of this article then discusses previous academic research into internet and social media use by New Zealand voters and political parties. In section four the focus switches to the level of expenditure on Facebook and Google advertisements by the six main parties. Data from secondary sources, and from Facebook's ad library is collated to quantify parties' expenditure on social media advertisements. Audience numbers for advertisements are also reported. Section five considers gaps in the literature relating to both survey data and content analysis of Facebook posts.

Section six uses survey data to evaluate New Zealand voters' use of Facebook for political information during the 2020 election campaign, and whether Facebook is replacing or supplementing their use of traditional media sources. The finely-grained content analysis categories used by the Manifesto Project, applied here to text from Facebook posts and the main parties' video advertisements, are described in section seven. Section eight examines how much information voters were getting about parties' policies from browsing parties' social media pages, and whether this information would help voters become more informed. Then section nine considers how similar parties' policies in social media posts were to their policies in other policy statements, such as webpages and traditional manifestos, and whether parties were providing voters with choices between different types of policies. If parties' positions on the main dimensions of competition are similar in different mediums, and parties are ideologically distinct from each other, this promotes democracy by making it easier for voters to choose between different policy alternatives (Budge and Meyer 2013, pp. 11-13; Budge 2013, p. 136; Merz and Regel 2013, p. 160). How parties use Facebook posts to encourage people to vote, thus promoting democracy, is considered in section ten. Section eleven is the conclusion, and also considers long-term developments in the traditional media and the need for further research.

2. The consequences of social media for democracy
Social media includes platforms such as Facebook, which internationally has been the dominant social media platform since about 2010, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, as well as newer platforms such as TikTok. Whether social media has positive or negative effects for democracy and citizen participation has been widely researched, with the results suggesting the effects of social media vary over time and between individual elections in countries.

For some elections, including the United States Presidential elections since 2016 and the 2016 Brexit referendum, the information people receive from social media has sometimes been low quality and not very accurate, and voters relying on social media for news have found themselves in echo chambers that have benefitted populist parties (Semetko and Tworzecki 2017, pp. 298-299; Gibson 2020, p. 221). Social media use has also been criticised for reducing the time people have to devote to more balanced and higher quality news (Cacciatore et al. 2018, p. 419). Indeed, meta-analysis of voter knowledge levels shows the contribution of social media towards informing people is often minimal (Amsalem and Zoizner 2022, p. 3).

However, at the elections where social media was seen as having a negative effect, populist sentiment was often already strong, and some private sector television news channels had already moved away from established fairness doctrines to concentrate on appealing to people with particular political views (Zelizer 2017, pp. 176-189). Some of these countries, such as the United Kingdom, also had long-established partisan national newspapers that tailored news coverage to suit the views of their readers (Brandenburg and Van Egmond 2012). Furthermore, political misinformation seems to be strongly associated with right-wing populist politicians, rather than all politicians (Törnberg and

Chueri 2025). In addition, although Donald Trump has used social media effectively, Trump was already adept at using established mediums, such as newspapers, magazines, television, and ghost-written autobiographies to report his views, enhance his reputation, and spread disinformation (Grove 2017; Mickey and Nolan 2019).

Social media has made it easier and cheaper for parties, especially small parties, to publish their policy messages and to mobilise voters (Campante, Durante, and Tesei 2023, p. 17). Voters often dislike negative advertisements, and frequently campaigns are policy focussed (Borah 2016, p. 335). For instance, Barack Obama used YouTube and Facebook to mobilise and effectively inform voters during his 2008 and 2012 Presidential campaigns (Baldwin-Philippi 2018, p. 529). In addition, Senator McCain, the Republican Presidential candidate in 2008, publicly corrected a woman who stated that Obama was an Arab. McCain also said that he thought Obama was a decent man, with whom he disagreed with on some policy issues (Fernandez 2018, p. 254). As well as being reported on by media at the time, with online versions of the story invariably containing a link to the video, McCain's correction has also been viewed over 10 million times on YouTube. The effects of social media on democracy therefore remain contested, and vary depending on the strategies of parties and politicians and the type of social media news consumed by voters.

3. New Zealand literature on social media use in politics

New Zealanders have been increasingly using the internet for political information (Crothers 2015, p. 138; Bickerton 2021; Robinson 2019, p. 284; Tsai, Tan, and Jung 2019), with over 80 percent of New Zealanders using the internet for political information by the time of the 2020 election (Krewel and Gibbons 2024). At the same time, there has been a decline in election coverage by New Zealand's main newspapers (Rudd and Hayward 2009, p. 94). The number of journalists in New Zealand more than halved between 2001 and 2018 (Loan et al. 2021, p. iv), while the rate of decline has accelerated since then (Holden 2024). Researchers have therefore increasingly studied political parties' and voters' use of social media.

Candidates with a large number of Facebook friends fared relatively well at New Zealand's 2011 election, although the effect was small (Cameron, Barrett, and Stewardson 2016) . Most use of social media, including Facebook, has been by political actors to broadcast information, rather than enabling two-way flows (Bickerton 2021, p. 179; Murchison 2015, p. 107; Ross and Bürger 2014, p. 59; Ross, Fountaine, and Comrie 2015, p. 263).

Election Study data shows that political parties have increasingly been using social media to contact voters, with almost 12 percent of voters being contacted by a political party through social media in 2020, compared to only 2.6 percent in 2011 (Krewel and Gibbons 2024, p. 84). However, social media contacts initiated by political parties are outnumbered by people browsing parties' social media pages. New Zealand Election Study data shows that just over 36 percent of New Zealanders used social media for political information at both the 2017 and 2020 elections. Almost all social media users used Facebook, with the percent using Twitter and Instagram being lower. Those using

Facebook for political information tended to be relatively young and were more likely to be female. However, income effects were weak and Facebook use was similar across all educational levels (Krewel and Gibbons 2024, pp. 81-83).

Political cleavages in New Zealand have been studied using a natural language processor to code Facebook text into the 56 policy categories of the Manifesto Project. However, analysis was only at the level of the Project's seven policy domains. Chi-Squared tests showed that social cleavages were evident on Facebook during the 2017 election, as well as the theoretically expected dependent relationships between parties and social cleavages (Phillips and Woodman 2020, p. 302).

Traditional policy areas largely dominated social media posts by Labour's leader Jacinda Ardern at the 2017 election, although she also stated the gender pay gap should be eliminated (Cardo 2021, pp. 45-47). Ardern's effective use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis in March and April 2020 has been noted (McGuire et al. 2020, p. 362).

Research by the New Zealand Social Media Study (NZSMS), based at Victoria University of Wellington, showed that the nine main New Zealand parties and their leaders posted 3,037 Facebook posts in the month before the 2020 election, with posts increasing as the final day for voting neared. Posts were coded using the Campaign for Strasbourg (CamforS) scheme, which had been applied to the 2019 European elections and also to countries outside Europe (Fenoll et al. 2021; Krewel and Vowles 2020a). Issue coverage was high, with the economy, a broad range of social issues, the environment, domestic policy, and health being the most important topics. The governing centre-left Labour Party and its leader kept their posts positive in tone. In contrast, the centre-right National Party and its leader made more negative posts as National lost ground in opinion polls.[1] Nevertheless, the overall tone of National's Facebook posts remained positive.

Fake news and half-truths were rare in Facebook posts by parties at the 2020 election, and were dominated by fringe parties that won no seats (Krewel and Gibbons 2024, pp. 76-77). Although National and its leader both posted a selectively edited clip from the leader's debate that implied Ardern had said farming is a 'world of the past', this was quickly identified as fake news by journalists (Cooke 2020; Houlahan 2020). Furthermore, misleading ads precede social media in New Zealand. For instance, National's 1975 television advertisements distorted the consequences of Labour's superannuation changes, while massively under-estimating the cost of its own policies (Robinson 2019, pp. 10-11), and also perpetuated negative stereotypes about immigrants.

In 2020, some candidates also made extensive use of social media to target younger voters, although targeting of ethnic minorities was low (Elder et al. 2021, pp. 109-117). National's Judith Collins relished her reputation for toughness in social media posts, while Jacinda Ardern made some informal and self-depreciating video posts that were appreciated by her followers. Both leaders focussed on campaigning activities and made few references to their families. This reflected how family obligations are sometimes seen as reducing commitment by women to their job, and privacy concerns (Ross, Fountaine, and Comrie 2022, p. 391, pp. 394-397). Nevertheless, Ardern sometimes used Facebook

and Instagram to challenge traditional conceptions of political leadership and motherhood, including realistic depictions of being a working mother (Timperley, Fitzpatrick, and Neely 2024, p. 2).

New Zealand politicians have also encountered online hatred, misogyny, and threats of violence, with Twitter and Facebook not adhering to the online safety code they signed (Espiner 2025). Online threats have sometimes contributed to women, such as Jacinda Ardern, leaving politics (Fisher 2023; Mudgway 2023). Such abuse was more difficult to publish before social media. However, politicians such as Helen Clark and Jenny Shipley suffered from gendered representations in the media (Fountaine and Comrie 2016) and from death threats (Jones 2017; NZPA 2007). In addition, before social media New Zealand politicians sometimes found it desirable to avoid groups of people who opposed their policies.

4. Spending on Facebook and Google ads by parties in 2020
There was also extensive media coverage of New Zealand political parties' 2020 social media campaigns, often using data downloaded from Facebook's ad library and from Google. Since 2017, New Zealand political parties have been allocated public funding that they can use for television, YouTube and social media advertisements, which is equivalent to the funding they previously received for party political television broadcasts. Table 1 shows that parties spent substantial amounts of money on Facebook and Google (including YouTube) advertisements during the 2023 election campaign (Junn 2020). The two main parties each spent over half a million dollars on these platforms, which amounted to over 22 percent of their total advertising spend (Electoral Commission 2020). Often these advertisements were targeted to particular population groups (Hancock 2020a; Nadkarni and Newton 2020), although this has been seen as potentially harmful to democracy (Ferrer 2020; Dowling 2024, p. 997), and not always effective (Zhao 2023). National's Facebook advertisements to increase the number of likes of the page of its not very popular leader were criticised as a poor way of getting people to engage with National's policies, or to attract support from undecided voters (Hancock 2020c).

During the last week of the campaign, Labour substantially outspent National and New Zealand's four smaller parties (Hancock 2020b). These smaller parties included the well-established Green Party and also the Māori Party, which re-entered Parliament with two MPs after winning an electorate seat reserved for New Zealand's indigenous people. The other two smaller parties were the neo-liberal ACT Party, which went from one to 10 MPs in 2020, and the nationalist and socially conservative New Zealand First Party (NZF). NZF received only 2.6 percent of the 2020 party vote, and was eliminated from Parliament.

The highest proportion of expenditure by the parties on Facebook and Google advertisements was 61.4 percent of total advertising expenditure by the Green Party. The other small parties spent relatively little on Facebook and Google advertisements. However, for some parties the advertising spend is a poor reflection of the use they made of Facebook. For instance, the Māori Party heavily used Facebook to network with supporters and live-stream meetings, even though it ran few advertisements on Facebook. Because of the large geographic size of the electorates where it was most

competitive, and low attention by traditional media, the Māori Party made considerable use of Facebook for mobilisation (Greaves and Morgan 2021, p. 321). In contrast, New Zealand First supporters tend to be older, and sometimes living in rural areas where internet access is still poor (Vowles 2020b, p. 62). It is therefore not surprising that New Zealand First spent relatively little on Facebook and Google advertisements.

Table 1: Government advertisement funding for the 2020 election and Facebook and Google spend in the last month of the election campaign by the main parties

Party	Government ad funding total	Total ad spending	Facebook and Google spend last week	Facebook and Google spend July-October	Share total spend on Facebook and Google
ACT	$150,755	$1,082,166	$30,557	$184,748	17.1%
Green	$323,046	$792,408	$122,832	$486,842	61.4%
Labour	$1,249,111	$2,387,077	$243,856	$556,783	23.3%
Māori	$150,755	$241,986	$10,555	$22,500	9.3%
National	$1,335,255	$2,343,999	$167,856	$533,995	22.8%
New Zealand First	$323,046	$621,646	$7,979	$46,188	7.4%

Sources: (Electoral Commission 2020; Junn 2020).

Table 2 shows audience numbers for Labour's initial television advertisements, which also screened on Google's YouTube and on Facebook and were reviewed and available in news stories (Coughlan 2020b; Ensor 2020; Walls 2020a) the summary of Labour's campaign launch used on social media; and the heavily promoted video of Labour's photogenic leader reading her party's five-point plan for economic recovery. Table 3 shows equivalent audience numbers for National's main television, Facebook and YouTube ad, which had also been described and was available in news stories (Coughlan 2020a; Palmer 2020; TVNZ 2020), and National's highly promoted economic plan video. Social media has clearly been important to parties' election campaigning, with some posts by the two main parties viewed by over a million people, and some videos watched by hundreds of thousands of people. Even those who do not use Facebook and YouTube were likely to see key advertisements on television news, or reported on in news stories. In a sense, the Facebook posts and some videos are a modern, highly-abbreviated, version of a party's programme. Parties also ran ads on social media targeted to specific population groups, which are the modern-day descendant of the tailored ads that once ran in magazines and union and business publications (Mitchell 1962, p. 64), and the targeted mail that was also important (Cousins and McLeay 1997, p. 91).

Table 2. Key Labour Party videos and screen advertisements

Advertisement or video	Audience	Duration
Let's keep moving – 1st 2020 ad	201,000+ on YouTube	30 seconds
Playbook – 2nd 2020 ad	Unclear as later deleted	30 seconds
Campaign launch summary	731,000+ on Facebook	2 minutes, 40 seconds
Five-point plan for economic recovery	422,000+ on Facebook	2 minutes, 28 seconds

Source: Facebook's ad library and Labour's YouTube page.

Table 3. Key National Party videos and screen advertisements

Advertisement or video	Audience	Duration
Let me be straight with you	29,000+ on Facebook	30 seconds
Economic Plan	1,000,000+ on Facebook	3 minutes, 28 seconds

Source: Facebook's ad library.

For the minor parties, their main advertisements on Facebook tended to very short, and often focussed on single topics. Despite some state funding, the smaller parties seem to have lacked the resources to produce long videos outlining their policies, which limits how much voters can learn about parties' policies by watching party videos. For instance, the Green Party produced a one-minute summary of their campaign launch that contained just eight sentences. However, the Māori Party published a 29-sentence summary of its policies in an image on Facebook during the last days of the election campaign (Māori Party 2020b). In the past this would have been a print brochure, illustrating how campaigning has migrated to social media.

5. Gaps in the literature
Although section three showed there is a growing academic literature on New Zealand voters' and political parties' use of the internet and social media for political purposes, there are still gaps in our knowledge that this article seeks to fill. For instance, there is potential to make greater use of survey data, using questions only asked at the 2020 election, to better understand how New Zealanders are using social media to understand politics, and whether social media use is displacing or is additional to use of traditional media sources.

In addition, the NZSMS coded policy topics in posts according to the Campaign for Strasbourg (CamforS) scheme of 12 categories that has been applied to over a dozen countries around the world (Fenoll et al. 2021). This is a relatively new and simple coding

scheme for policy topics, designed to be applied quickly during an election along with about 20 other codes. For instance, the CamforS economy category includes both left and right-wing perspectives on topics like taxation, while the "social issues" and "domestic policy" categories are, without further analysis, not very meaningful. This limited the analysis by the NZSMS of which topics parties were discussing in their Facebook posts, and made calculating their positions on the main dimensions of competition impossible.

The more complex and finely grained Manifesto Project coding scheme, which makes it possible to place parties on political dimensions such as left versus right and socially conservative versus socially progressive dimensions, has been applied to party programmes, parliamentary speeches and tweets (Ivanusch 2024), and applied here to Facebook posts. Whereas CamforS has the entire Facebook post as the unit of analysis, the more precise Manifesto Project methodology breaks text down into quasi-sentences each containing one political message (Volkens and Werner 2010). Although, as noted in section three, the Manifesto Project methodology has been applied to 2017 New Zealand election Facebook posts (Phillips and Woodman 2020), no analysis of parties' positions on the main dimensions of competition was carried out. With parties' making greater use of social media, research into the quantity (section eight) and quality of information voters receive is also overdue. In particular, section nine is able to consider whether New Zealand political parties' policies are similar in different communication mediums, and also whether elections allow voters to choose between different policy alternatives.

6. How people used social media for information about politics

New Zealand Election Study data[2] shows that just over 36 percent of New Zealanders used social media for political information at the 2020 election, with almost all of them using Facebook. Unpublished NZES data shows a quarter of New Zealanders reported having used a social media site to promote an issue (including an on-line petition) in the last five years. Four percent of New Zealanders reported posting on social media to say they had voted.

People were mostly using Facebook in addition to other media sources, with Figure 1 showing that those using Facebook were more likely to use newspapers and their websites, and very slightly more likely to watch television news, than non-Facebook users. For talkback radio and public service radio, the differences were small and not statistically significant. Facebook use has sometimes been seen as having a negative effect on political knowledge, through displacing consumption of traditional media sources (Cacciatore et al. 2018). However, as in Sweden, people in New Zealand in 2020 were largely using social media in addition to traditional media sources (Shehata and Strömbäck 2021, p. 140).
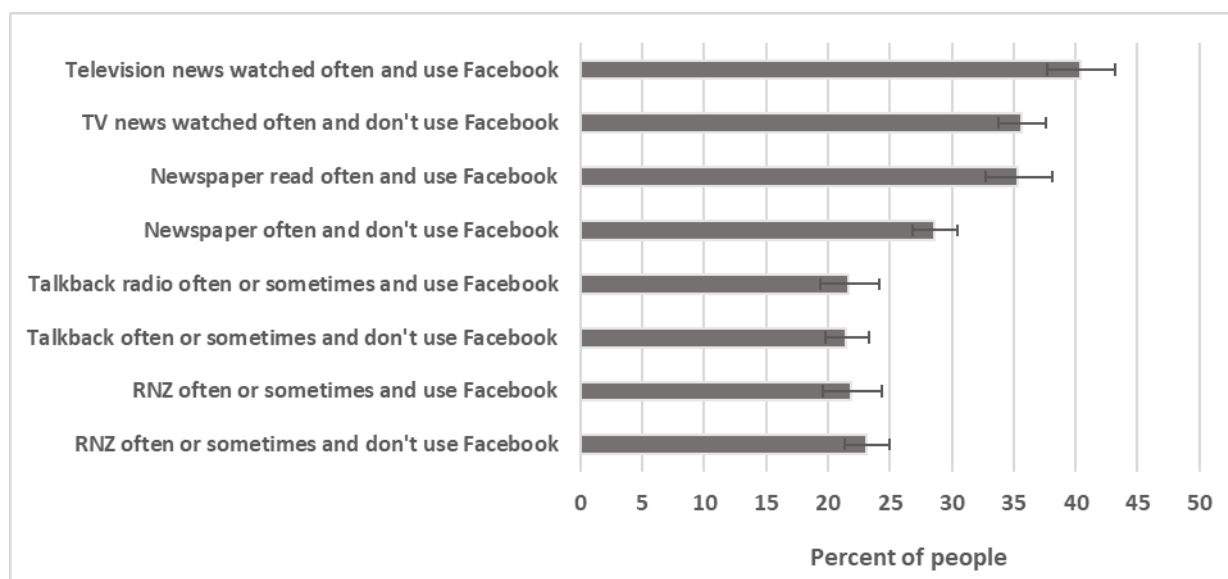
Figure 1: Use of traditional media sources by those who use and do not use Facebook for political information. Source: New Zealand Election Study 2020 (NZES).

Election Study data showed that only 4.7 percent of the sample used Facebook for political information, while not using traditional media sources "at all". Figure 2 shows that this group tended to be relatively young. However, the results suggested a non-linear effect for age, which was not statistically significant for the sample, but has been found in other Election Study results. This was probably because those born in the 2000s were more likely than older age groups to be living with their parents and therefore exposed to the media sources their parents were consuming.

Although the confidence intervals are large, the results in Figure 2 suggest that those who identified with fringe anti-establishment parties (the New Conservatives, Advance New Zealand, the New Zealand Outdoors & Freedom Party and traditionalist religious parties) were also more likely to only use Facebook for political information. This was expected considering that supporters of populist parties tend to distrust traditional media sources (Ernst et al. 2019; Postill 2018). However, there were no supporters of the populist New Zealand First party who used only Facebook for political information in the sample, with this reflecting the tendency of New Zealand First supporters to be relatively old, and to live in rural areas (Vowles 2020b, p. 62) where internet access is still relatively poor. National and Green Party identifiers were less likely to use only Facebook for political information, while the effects for identifying with the other parties were not statistically significant. Those with higher household income were slightly more likely to use just Facebook for political information. Variables for gender, education and ethnicity were not statistically significant and have been dropped.
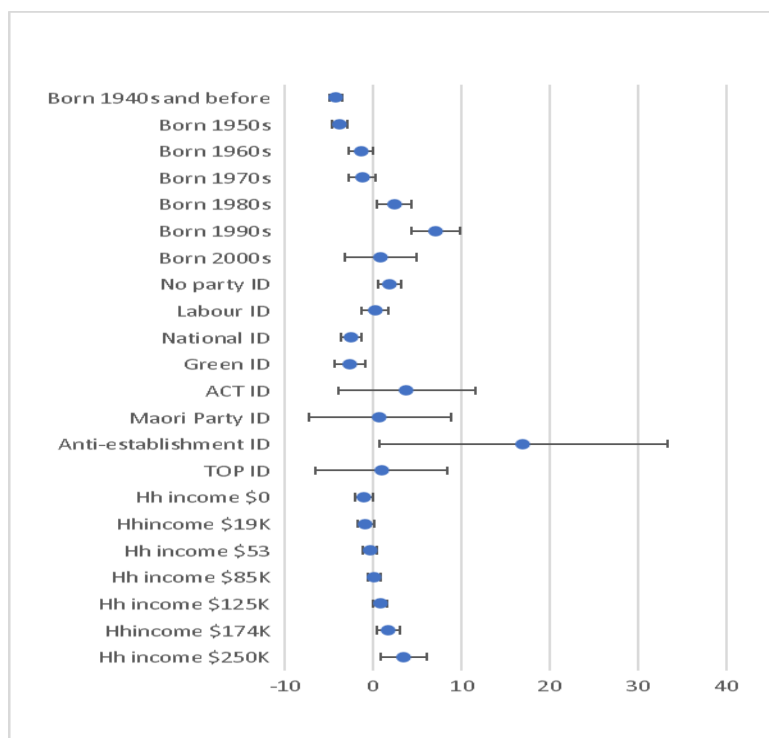
Figure 2: Percentage by which use of Facebook, but not traditional media, for political information is different to mean use. Source 2020 NZES.

No questions on political knowledge were included in the 2020 New Zealand Election Study. However, there was no difference in self-reported understanding of political issues between Facebook and non-Facebook users. In contrast, those who only used Facebook for political information were less likely to feel that they understood the most important political issues in New Zealand. Nevertheless, compared to age and income effects, or identifying with a fringe party, the effects were small.

7. Coding parties' Facebook posts
This article now discusses the methods used to code parties' social media posts and other policy statements.[3] Text scraped from parties' webpages and text from the two main parties' videos and the Māori Party's Facebook summary post was hand coded in Excel using the Manifesto Project methodology by the New Zealand coder for the Manifesto Project. The Manifesto Project has collected and coded election programmes from around the world, with coverage of long-established democracies extending back to the mid-1940s (Budge and Bara 2001; Budge and Meyer 2013, p. 18), and for New Zealand back to 1905 (Gibbons 2000, 2011). Examples of the coding categories are shown in Table 4. Sentences in the scraped texts were broken up into distinct policy ideas and each allocated one of 90 (some subcodes are used for New Zealand) different policy codes. For instance, a sentence about longer jail terms was coded as law and order: positive, while a promise to build new roads was coded as infrastructure: positive. This allows for more disaggregated analysis than using the CamforS coding scheme initially used by the New Zealand Social Media Study (Krewel and Gibbons 2024) and enables comparisons to parties' positions in other policy documents.

Table 4: Examples of main Manifesto Project categories

Coding categories	Brief description
Market economy: positive	Support for free enterprise and free markets; incentives to promote entrepreneurial activities, and free trade.
State intervention: positive	Support for market regulation to protect consumers; economic planning and protectionism; the need for economic controls and state ownership.
Labour groups: positive	The importance of trade unions and of higher wages.
Agriculture and farmers: positive	Specific policies to help agriculture and farmers.
Welfare state expansion	Support for expanding social services, including health and housing.
Government efficiency and macroeconomic orthodoxy	Support for government efficiency; and for orthodox fiscal and monetary policies.
Social conservatism	National way of life; traditional morality and traditional families; strict law and order; need for national unity and civic mindedness.
Environment and sustainability	Support for protecting the environment, and for ensuring development is environmentally sustainable.
Production and infrastructure	Support for economic growth; also for new infrastructure, such as roads, and also research, and technical education.
Māori rights and equality.	The rights of Māori, including policies to help them, and to promote equality for Māori.
Māori rights: negative	Negative references to the rights of Māori and promises to end Treaty settlements and perceived separatism.
Political authority	The competency of a party or its leader compared to other parties and their leaders.

Table 5 shows the additional codes also added for general appeals for people, including those overseas, to vote, announcements of meetings and debates, and appeals for volunteers. In total, 17.1 percent of sentences in Facebook posts were about appeals to people to vote, volunteer, participate, or referred to the competency of a party or its leader.[4] As for the Manifesto Project, links to webpages were not coded. Although 29 percent of posts by the main parties contained a link to a video, these videos were not watched when determining parties' positions. Instead, the aim was to find out how much political information an undecided voter browsing the main parties' Facebook pages, without opening any links, would be exposed to. Table 6 gives an example of how one of Labour's last Facebook posts was coded.

Table 5: Additional categories for campaigning

Coding category	Brief description
Candidates	References to the appearance of candidates and leaders in public.
Volunteers	The need for more volunteers, and work by party volunteers.
Meetings and debates	References to the time and date of meetings and debates, and the desirability of attending or watching.
Voting	Mentions of how voting had started and the need for people to vote.

Table 6: Example of coded text

Text	Numeric code	Title of code
Need a reason to vote Labour? Here's 10:	305.1	Political authority: Positive
We'll make Matariki a public holiday	607.3	Indigenous rights: Positive
Free apprenticeships	411.5	Infrastructure positive: technical education
A balanced plan with no $8 billion fiscal hole	414	Economic orthodoxy
Building thousands of new state houses	504.1	Welfare state expansion: Housing
A plan that puts people first	503.1	Social justice: economic
Mental health support in all schools	506	Education expansion
Rolling out healthy lunches into more schools	506	Education expansion
Real action on climate change	501	Environment positive
100% renewable electricity by 2030	416.2	Sustainability positive

8. The length and issue coverage of parties' policy statements

Although Facebook posts were invariably highly visual, Table 7 shows that the main parties' Facebook pages frequently published large quantities of text. For instance, National's Facebook posts contained 517 sentences. Longer documents can mean that a party's position is less influenced by miscodings or ambiguous language (Benoit, Laver, and Mikhaylov 2009; Volkens and Werner 2010, p. 10). However, very long documents may be poorly edited, and therefore more difficult to code, or indicate a divided party. Furthermore, although webpages can yield large quantities of text, they are sometimes

not meant to be read as a single document (Budge, McDonald, and Meyer 2013, p. 82; Merz and Regel 2013, p. 150). Several parties' Facebook pages included text copied directly from their manifesto or webpages. These results support the view that New Zealand social media posts have considerable substance, and are not just superficially covering political topics (Bickerton 2021, p. 178). Potentially more text could have been added by coding scraped image text and text from the 13.8 percent of posts by the main parties that were reposts, and by adding posts by party leaders. Because of the strong results using the automatically scraped message text, this was not considered necessary.

Table 7: Number of sentences of text in different policy statements and the number of effective issues for each party.

Name of party	Number of sentences in manifesto or webpages (effective issues)	Number of sentences in leader's speech (effective issues)	Number of Facebook posts	Number of sentences in posts (effective issues)	Number of sentences in video ads (effective issues)
ACT	1524 (20.9)	408 (12.0)	97	268 (8.6)	
Green	908 (7.8)	156 (15.1)	197	525 (5.9)	
Labour	626 (21.8)	218 (19.9)	377	588 (10.2)	81 (13.3)
Māori	1062 (5.81)	Not located	130	207 (5.23)	
National	1920 (16.7)	127 (13.8)	239	517 (12.4)	61 (10.4)
New Zealand First	745 (24.8)	251 (11.7)	153	307 (14.9)	

Only Labour, the Greens and New Zealand First issued traditional manifestos in 2020. For the remaining parties, webpages had been coded for the Manifesto Project using the methods described in section seven. Because the webpages tend to be bland, leaders' campaign opening speeches had also been coded (although a speech was not available for the Māori Party) for additional analysis and to provide an alternative left-right policy position. However, high references to political authority in campaign opening speeches to party members (Gemenis 2012, p. 598; Gibbons 2024, p. 16; 2011, p. 58) can make them unsuitable for comparisons to print documents on aggregate dimensions unless the political authority category is excluded.

Although Table 7 shows that the Facebook posts yield a reasonable number of codable sentences, the posts tend to be repetitive. This is reflected in the number of effective issues covered (Laakso and Taagepera 1979; Merz and Regel 2013, p. 162) always being lower than for each party's manifesto or webpage. With the exception of New Zealand First, the number of effective issues in the Facebook posts was always lower than for the party's campaign launch speech. Facebook campaigns tend to be most successful when they focus on a narrow range of topics. Indeed, social media marketing experts criticised

National, who had the highest effective number of issues in its Facebook posts, for having too many messages on its Facebook page during the election campaign (S. Williams 2020). However, the need for parties to concentrate on their core topics on Facebook may help undecided voters understand the key messages parties are campaigning on, promoting informed choices.

9. Parties' positions in different policy statements

This section considers how similar parties' policies were in different policy statements, and whether parties provided voters with a choice between different policy alternatives. Figure 3 therefore compares parties' positions, in different types of policy statement, on the two main dimensions of New Zealand politics. The results using parties' policy documents show a similar pattern to those found by researchers who have studied the average policy positions of New Zealand political parties' supporters (Vowles 2004, pp. 126-128; Vowles et al. 1995, p. 203; Vowles, Coffe, and Curtin 2017, p. 11). ACT, followed by National, were most right-wing economically, and both parties were relatively socially conservative and pro-growth. In contrast, the Green and Māori parties were relatively left-wing and socially progressive. Labour was economically left-wing and, when equivalent documents are compared, more socially progressive than New Zealand First.[5]

New Zealand First stands out for being the least distinct of the parties. NZF's manifesto and Facebook pages put it in a similar position to Labour, whereas its highly quoted leader's speech, which attacked 'woke pixie dust' and defended socially conservative values, like restricting immigration and the right to a belief in God (Moir 2020; Quinlivan 2020; Walls 2020b) placed NZF nearer National. However, it is common for centre parties, like NZF, to move between the left and the right in different policy documents (Budge, McDonald, and Meyer 2013, pp. 94-97).
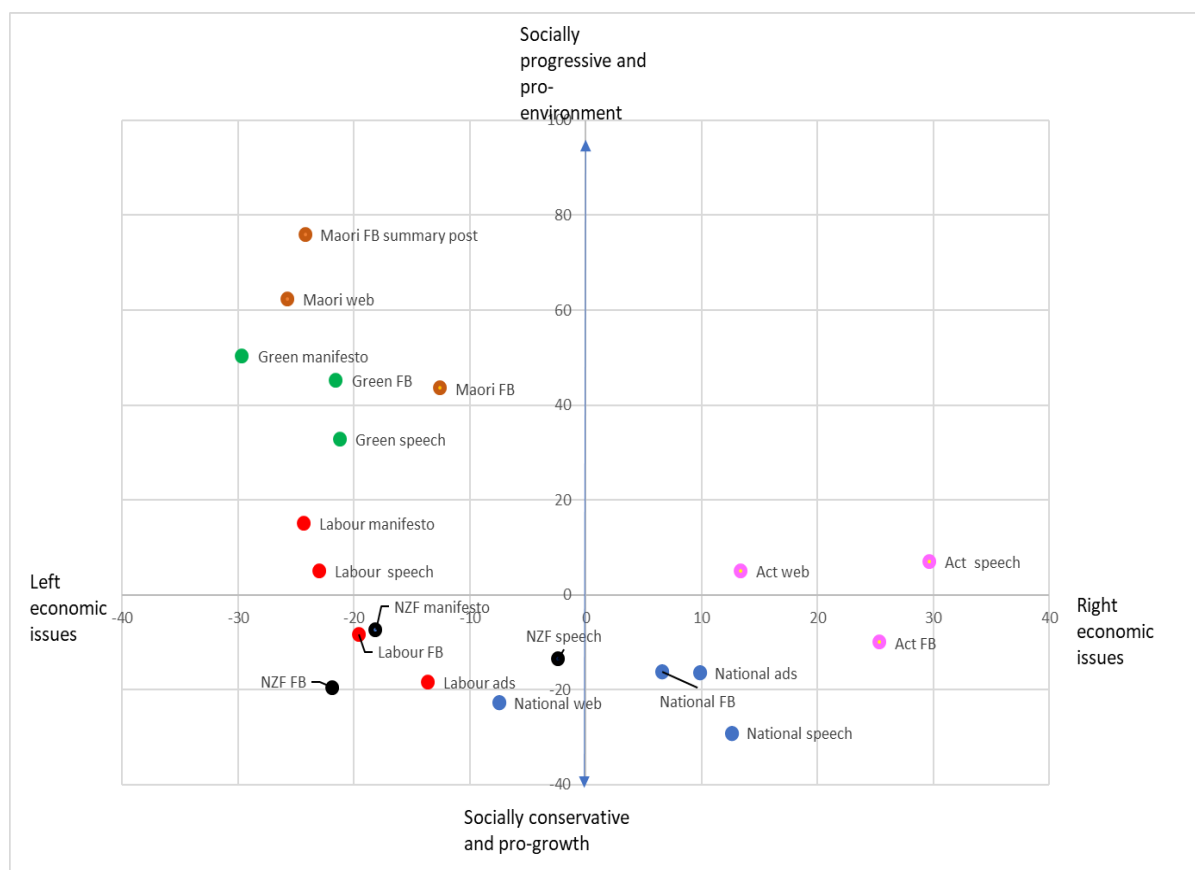
Figure 3: Parties' positions using content analysis results from different sources at the 2020 election. Source: author's content analysis results.

For all the parties, the position of their policies in Facebook posts was largely similar to their position in other documents. This indicates that people who use Facebook to understand parties' policies were getting broadly similar information on their positions on the two main dimensions of competition to voters who used parties' manifestos and webpages, or watched or read their opening campaign speeches. This would have helped voters choose a party that represented their interests and concerns. Rather than being superficial, the Facebook posts of the main parties in 2020 had considerable issue content that informed voters about parties' main priorities, and therefore supported democracy by aiding decision-making by voters.

Although NZF's Facebook position was in Labour territory, NZF's individual policies tended to be very different to Labour's. For instance, NZF's Facebook pages showed its attempts to attract support from voters who wanted a stronger military; its support for regional development, agriculture, and heavy industry; and its opposition to some multicultural policies. NZF also had three posts supporting the replacement of 1080 for pest control by trapping (e.g. New Zealand First 2020b) and these were designed to appeal to those who were suspicious of chemical use, including some voters who were uncertain about the safety of the Covid-19 vaccine, rather than most environmentalists. To some extent a two-dimensional framework for parties' policies is an oversimplification, and this is clear when comparing NZF to the two main parties. Nevertheless, the results

suggest that NZF could have differentiated itself from Labour more at the 2020 election in its Facebook posts.

National's webpage position was well to the left of its position in other documents. This has also happened at other elections, with National's webpages tending to emphasise spending promises. In contrast, in shorter policy statements National tends to emphasise to a greater extent right-wing themes, such as lower taxes, ambition, and welfare reform. National's position in its Facebook posts and its screen advertisements was well to the right of its webpages, providing further evidence that National's webpages are sometimes not the best depiction of the policies it is presenting to the electorate (Gibbons 2024). National did not have a print or web brochure that summarised its politics at the 2020 election, with the results for its Facebook posts and screen advertisements providing two more valuable data points for its 2020 policies. There are often advantages in using multiple policy statements to consider how the messages voters have received have differed between communication mediums during an election.

References to agriculture and farmers made up 3.5 percent of policy sentences in both National's webpages and its Facebook posts. For NZF, 5.9 percent of sentences in its manifesto were about agriculture, fishing, and forestry, compared to 2.9 percent of sentences in its Facebook posts. Similarly, 6.0 percent of sentences in ACT's webpages and 3.7 percent of sentences in its Facebook posts were commitments to agriculture and farmers. Labour also made positive references to farmers on Facebook during the election campaign after National erroneously tried to suggest Labour had stated "the world of farming is in the past" (Cooke 2020; Krewel and Vowles 2020b).

The data for individual issues also, not unexpectedly, reveals that the Green Party consistently emphasised the environment and sustainability most, with 27.8 percent of its manifesto, 33.3 percent of its campaign launch speech, and 42 percent of its Facebook post sentences being about these topics. Labour's Facebook posts and YouTube videos both had more than 6 percent of the content about the environment and sustainability, whereas these topics were just 0.77 percent of the content of National's Facebook posts and none of the content of National's YouTube video.

Labour's Facebook posts placed a higher emphasis on rights for the Rainbow community than its manifesto. This could imply its Facebook posts were designed to appeal more to younger voters, although Labour's Facebook posts also profiled life-long Labour volunteers. Labour's Facebook pages were therefore not just aimed at young voters.

Support for indigenous rights made up 45.9 percent of policy sentences on the Māori Party's webpages, 41 percent of sentences in its Facebook page, and 62.1 percent of sentences in its Facebook policy summary. Indigenous rights were 4.3 percent of the content of Labour's manifesto, but just 1.2 percent of the content of Labour's Facebook posts, although coding image text would have increased this proportion.

The Māori Party placed much less emphasis on the environment and sustainability in its Facebook posts (0.5 percent of sentences) than its webpages (11.6 percent of sentences),

although its 29-sentence Facebook summary of its policies had a strong emphasis (6.9 percent of sentences) on the environment and sustainability (Māori Party 2020b). Nevertheless, the Māori Party's Facebook posts still had a strong emphasis on socially progressive topics other than indigenous rights, including reform of the justice system. Similarly, the Green Party placed less emphasis on support for indigenous people in its Facebook posts (0.8 percent of sentences) than in its manifesto (6.4 percent of sentences). This was because parties focussed more on core topics for their supporters in Facebook posts than in their manifestos or webpages, where there was less constraint over how much text was included. This may make Facebook posts relatively useful for poorly informed voters who want to know a party's main priorities.

10. The importance of mobilisation and competency messages

This section considers mobilisation efforts, which here include text about the importance of voting, volunteering in campaigning, the competence of a party and its candidates, party meetings, and the appearance of candidates in debates. These messages made up 17.1 percent of the total content of party Facebook posts, and steadily increased from less than 10 percent of the content of Facebook posts at the start of the four-week election campaign to over 20 percent in the final week. This is a similar pattern to using the CamforS code that identified whether a post included mobilisation messages (Krewel and Gibbons 2024). New Zealand allows early voting by people overseas and in New Zealand during the two weeks before election day, so there were incentives for parties to encourage early voting by potential supporters. While internationally there has been concern that social media can be used to demobilise people (Gibson 2020, p. 222), the 2020 New Zealand election parties' Facebook posts encouraged people to vote, volunteer, and attend political meetings. This is positive for democracy.

Mobilisation messages were particularly important for the Māori Party, making up 41.3 percent of the total content of its posts. The Māori Party used Facebook to encourage people to attend meetings and persuade potential supporters to vote. These posts included discussing the importance of the candidate vote in the Māori electorates and vote splitting, the need to thoroughly check family members had enrolled and voted, and also how New Zealand's large Māori population in Australia could vote (Māori Party 2020a, 2020c). Mobilisation messages were next highest for Labour, making up 22.2 percent of the content of its posts. Labour was well ahead in the polls, and its Facebook posts often concentrated on its competency, divisions within National, the desirability of voting early (Hancock 2020b), and the fulfilment gained from being a volunteer with Labour's campaign. Whereas competency is a topic that National has often campaigned on (Robinson 2019, pp. 255, 264-266), the effectiveness of Labour's policies to control Covid-19 and disunity within National meant that Labour was in a stronger position to campaign on competency in 2020. The prominence of competency messages, and the fact that Labour attracted many centrist voters who were voting for it for non-policy reasons (Vowles 2024, pp. 46, 51), may have weakened the mandate some Labour politicians felt after the election to proceed with traditional social democratic policies.

The Green Party emphasised people could "get your Greens" in addition to Labour, by giving their party vote to the Green Party so that Labour would have to continue to share

power with the Greens (Green Party 2020). New Zealanders living overseas are often young people travelling or on working holidays, and often support the Green Party. Like the Māori Party, the Green Party therefore ran videos on Facebook showing those living overseas how they could enrol and vote (Arseneau and Roberts 2021).

New Zealand First mobilisation messages concentrated on the party's competency, its nation-wide bus tour to meet ordinary New Zealanders, and the work of its volunteers. NZF dismissed the polls, in which it was trailing, as "fake", and encouraged people to party vote for NZF, but issued no general get out and vote messages (New Zealand First 2020a). Similarly, ACT focussed on its competency, and what it could achieve with more MPs (ACT 2020). Neither NZF nor ACT identified potential coalition partners. The party that made the fewest mobilisation efforts was National, which was polling poorly. National's posts argued that Labour had underdelivered (New Zealand National Party 2020). National's Facebook posts continued to strongly concentrate on policy messages, rather than encouraging people to vote. However, other researchers have found that Labour's and National's party leaders made the same number of posts urging people to vote (Ross, Fountaine, and Comrie 2022, p. 395).

11. Conclusion and Future Research

This article has considered the consequences for democracy in New Zealand of social media use by voters during the 2020 general election campaign, and of the information about parties' policies that was conveyed to voters in social media. Survey data shows that just over 36 percent of New Zealanders used social media for political information in 2020, with almost all social media users using Facebook. However, survey data showed that most voters were also using traditional media sources, and that Facebook users were slightly more likely to be newspaper readers and to watch television news than those who did not use Facebook. Few voters exclusively used Facebook for political information, although those who were reliant entirely on Facebook for news tended to assess their level of political knowledge as being low. Social media use for political information was therefore largely complementing, rather than replacing, use of traditional media sources that help hold politicians to account.

New Zealand political parties made considerable use of Facebook and spent heavily on Facebook and Google advertisements at New Zealand's 2020 general election. These advertisements also often screened on television and were reported on in news stories. Facebook posts and the texts of the two main parties' video advertisements were coded using the Manifesto Project's methodology. The positions of parties on the two main dimensions of competition in New Zealand were distinct from each other, but broadly similar for each party using text from manifestos, webpages, opening campaign speeches and social media posts. The distinctiveness of parties' policy positions, irrespective of the type of media people used, promoted democracy by allowing voters to choose between competing policy directions.

Although parties' Facebook messages tended to be highly repetitive and cover fewer topics than other mediums, this may help time-poor voters who want to understand the core priorities of a party. Using the Manifesto Project's methodology to code social media text produced more meaningful results than using the broader categories previously used, suggesting the Manifesto Project's methods for categorising political issues should be used by other social media researchers. The data also showed high use of Facebook posts by parties to mobilise supporters and to encourage voting, including strategic voting, particularly after early voting began. This enhanced the quality of democracy in New Zealand in 2020 by encouraging participation.

New Zealand's most recent general election was in 2023. In New Zealand in 2023, as in other counties which held elections about that time , video-based TikTok became an important platform (Grantham 2024), with parties and politicians, particularly from the centre-right, producing videos that were both humorous and informative (Harcourt 2023). After Elon Musk took control of Twitter, fact-checking was reduced, and many users moved to other platforms. In addition, since the re-election of Donald Trump in November 2024, other platforms, such as Facebook, have decreased fact-checking (Paul, Mukherjee, and Sophia 2025). Online hatred, misogyny and threats of violence are concerning (Espiner 2025). Social media has also been used to mobilise the over 300,000 responses to the controversial Treaty Principles Bill (Hanly 2025). New Zealand's 2026 general election may see entirely new social media platforms being important. However, with the decline of traditional media continuing, and the National-ACT-NZF government not intending to continue even existing time-limited public interest journalism funding beyond early 2026 (Dennett 2023), it is hard to see social media being less important in future for informing voters than it is now.

The decline of traditional mass media news sources is of considerable concern because of their fact-checking role (Holden 2024) and commitment to balanced coverage, impartiality, journalistic professionalism, and focus on the needs of the general public (Ellis 2024, pp. 7-9). The quality of traditional media sources is also important, because people make greater use of legacy media when they provide a higher quality product (Gibbons 2014). While parties' social media posts play an important role in increasing awareness of parties' policies, the traditional media also remain vitally important for informed decision-making by the public.

Future NZSMS research will consider the extent to which disinformation was spread by established and fringe parties at the 2023 New Zealand election, which took place in a much more negative political environment. The effects of traditional and social media use on political knowledge could be tested for New Zealand if questions on voters' knowledge were added to future media use surveys. There also needs to be greater research into the political news people are encountering on social media from sources other than political parties. For instance, the NZSMS intends to research the extent to which new media entrants such as The Platform are targeting niche population groups.

However, the good news is that at the New Zealand 2020 general election, parties' Facebook posts delivered to voters considerable useful information that would have

helped them make informed decisions about who to vote for. In addition, parties' Facebook posts encouraged people to vote and become involved in politics. People were also largely using Facebook as a complementary news source to, rather than as a replacement for, traditional news sources. Content analysis results also showed that parties published similar messages about their policies on Facebook than those they included in their other policy statements. Other research has found that New Zealand's main parties largely ran positive campaigns in 2020 and that fake news and half-truths by them were rare (Krewel and Gibbons 2024, pp. 76-77). Together these results support the view that social media can play a relatively positive role in the democratic process, although the traditional media also remain vital for the health of democracy.

Conflict of Interests
 The author declares no conflict of interests.

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[1] Posts were coded as positive if they included statements, pictures or emotions which were supporting, encouraging, affirmative or assertive. Posts were coded as negative if they included statements, pictures or emotions of a hostile, disliking or refusing nature. Posts could contain both positive and negative content (Krewel and Vowles 2020c, pp. 23-24).

[2] The New Zealand Election Study (NZES) is a voluntary post-election survey of New Zealanders, conducted by post and using the internet. Data was weighted by Māori/general electorates, age, gender, highest educational qualification, party vote, and turnout (Curtin, Greaves, and Vowles 2024, p. 299).

[3] Facebook's CrowdTangle program, which Facebook has since discontinued, was used to download Facebook posts. CrowdTangle provided the text of Facebook posts, including the text of images. The two main parties' videos were transcribed by the author.

[4] The new campaign codes have been excluded from the percentages in section 9.

[5] The right end of the left-right scale is percentage of sentences about support for a market economy (free enterprise, incentives, free trade) plus economic constraint (government efficiency and economic orthodoxy) plus welfare state limitation, education negative and labour groups negative. The left end is percentage of sentences about support for state intervention (market regulation, economic planning, corporatism, protectionism, economic controls and state ownership), plus social justice: economic, welfare state expansion, education expansion, Keynesian demand management and labour groups positive. The environment and socially progressive end is percentage of sentences about sustainability, the environment, culture, equality for minorities, traditional morality and way of life: negative, law and order: rehabilitation, peace and cooperation, freedom and democracy, decentralisation: positive, multiculturalism and Māori, and minorities. The development and socially conservative end is economic growth, infrastructure, social conservatism (law and order, national way of life, traditional morality, social harmony), multiculturalism: negative, foreign special relationships, and defence: positive. This framework is similar to that used for studying British politics (Allen and Bara 2021) and in other countries.