



**University of Dundee**

## **From landslide to mudslide**

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## From landslide to mudslide: strategic marketing mistakes of New Zealand Labour

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Global Political Marketing – The Future and Aspirations of Political Marketing

Submission issue of the *International Journal of Market Research*

Edited by Dr Christopher Pich and Dr Guja Armannsdottir

**From landslide to mudslide: the strategic marketing mistakes of the 2020-2023**

**New Zealand Labour Government**

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For Peer Review

## Abstract

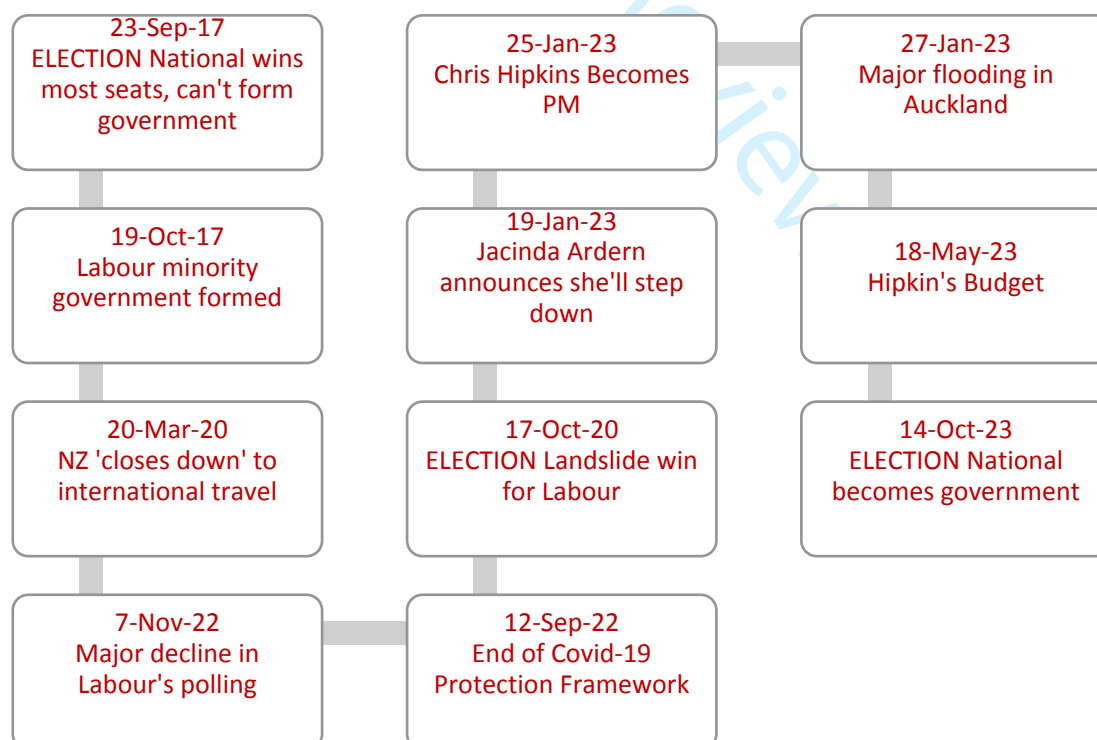
This article explores how a political party's fortunes can change extremely quickly, by examining the strategic errors behind the Labour Party's 2023 loss in New Zealand. In October 2020, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and the Labour Party of New Zealand won a landslide majority. This secured a once in a generation chance to deliver transformational change. However, just over two years later, Ardern exited following a profound drop in popularity. Although a respected minister, Chris Hipkins, took over, the party then suffered a massive defeat. We apply a playbook developed for the 2020 election to identify the reasons behind such a downturn in fortunes, noting the speed of change of voter priorities and Labour's failure to develop a clear vision or pivot to address changed priorities. We draw on multiple sources of data, including party policies, communications, polling data and the public engagement survey Vote Compass. This confirms that governments, to maintain support, must utilise appropriate market research and engage in careful political marketing planning, starting with understanding voter expectations from the last election.

## Introduction

This article explores **how a political party's fortunes can change quickly, by examining** the strategic lessons from the 2023 election loss of the Labour Government in New Zealand. Despite an unprecedented victory in 2020, just over two years later Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern exited following a profound drop in popularity and her party went on to suffer a massive loss in 2023. **Figure 1 depicts the timeline of key events in New Zealand politics from 2017-2023.**

**The question for this article is how can a once dominant party fall so low, so quickly?** This article explores the market research and strategic factors behind this reversal of fortunes, drawing on diverse and in-depth data, including party policies, communications, polling data and the public engagement survey Vote Compass. **The analysis applies a playbook developed for the 2020 election to see what changed between the high point of 2020 and the low of 2023. This allows us to highlight the importance of market research and strategic planning to achieve long-term success.**

*Figure 1. Timeline Of Key Events (2017-2023)*



## Literature review

This special issue and others prior to it (e.g. Harris et al 2010), shows political marketing is an established field within marketing and political science, (Lees-Marshment, 2012b; Lees-Marshment et al., 2019; Newman, 1999). Whilst initial research focused on communications, the field expanded to market research, strategy, branding and delivery. Rather than offer a shallow or repetitive survey of this expansive field, we discuss the most relevant literature to strategy and market research and New Zealand political marketing (but see Elder et al 2022 for further theoretical review).

### *Strategy and market research in politics*

Prior political marketing research investigated the use of market research (Baines and Worcester, 2000) by candidates, campaigns, parties and governments. This influenced focus area, policy proposals, public reaction, and effective communication (Kotler and Kotler, 1999; Mattinson, 1999, 2007; Sparrow and Turner, 2001). The market-oriented party concept argues that political candidates should offer, and deliver, a product informed by research on voters' needs, wants, and concerns (Lees-Marshment, 2001). Crises compound that need. Parties must demonstrate voter focus while conducting crisis mitigation (Boin et al., 2010; Siddiqi and Koerber, 2020).

Market-orientation matters for all marketers (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). This goes well beyond occasional polling. Research in multiple countries suggests that, once in office, politicians struggle to maintain market-orientation. Incumbents need to conduct regular market research to remain responsive to changing political markets (Heczko, 2010; Kotzaivazoglou, 2011; Lilleker and Lees-Marshment, 2005; Ormrod, 2005).

Deliberative strategies are set early in campaigns, seeing only tactical changes later. Interpretive strategies seek to control the market and emergent strategies adapt to radically changing environments using flexible strategies. Tacking with political winds risks long-term focus but can work in a crisis (Elder et al., 2022). A populist form of market-orientation (Winder and Tenscher, 2012) involves using market research to identify concerns before offering simple solutions and messages designed to appeal. Consistency is hard to maintain and blame is not necessarily accurately assigned, but this connects with the public.

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2  
3 Elder (2016) argues reinforcing responsiveness, leadership, and credibility is key to  
4 creating and maintaining public support. Communication matters, but success depends  
5 upon contextual factors, including the leader's personal brand and role as illustrated in how  
6 Arden integrated campaign and government communication during the COVID-19 crisis  
7 (Elder and Büdler, 2021).  
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12 Incumbents must deliver, and be seen to deliver, meaningful results, especially on  
13 the economy, to avoid defeat (Bennett, 2013; Lees-Marshment, 2018). Delivery involves  
14 making priorities clear before elections, often the creation of delivery units, communication  
15 of early wins, and showing the impact on individuals (Esselment, 2012a, 2012b).  
16 Uncontrollable events impact delivery (Rehr, 2013) and political marketing can be especially  
17 challenging in uncertain times (Sparrow and Turner, 1995).  
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### 23 24 *Political marketing in New Zealand* 25

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28 Rudd (2005) initiated political marketing research in New Zealand examining the  
29 Labour Party's market-orientation (1990-2003). Research continued for subsequent  
30 elections (Lees-Marshment, 2006, 2009, 2012a; Lees-Marshment et al., 2015). The quest to  
31 better understand public sentiment has included text analysis (Parackal et al., 2018) while  
32 Robinson's (2010) work examined market-orientation in party advertising. New Zealand  
33 **parties** used market research to inform their product, not just communication. Books  
34 explore varied topics including political branding, leader's market-oriented communication,  
35 and targeting (Elder and Lees-Marshment, 2021; Lees-Marshment, 2018).  
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43 Of particular relevance is the article by Elder et al., (2022) exploring political  
44 marketing in a crisis, focusing on the Labour Government's market research and strategy in  
45 the 2020 election during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research highlighted the  
46 challenges and opportunities a crisis created. It also noted that strategic gains offered by the  
47 crisis were temporary and not without political and social implications.  
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- 51  
52 • Pre-crisis market research and product design became obsolete as voters' priorities  
53 drastically **changed**.
- 54  
55 • Labour could strategically position as guardian of stable government in the crisis.  
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- A 'polite' populist communication strategy united New Zealanders against the common foe, COVID-19. While, the prime minister also utilised the opportunity to highlight less well-known elements of her own leadership brand.
- Overall, Labour's achievements temporarily overshadowed failures to deliver on promises made pre-crisis **suggesting Labour's gains might be temporary with unresolved delivery issues resurfacing.**

Elder et al., (2022)'s offered a Political Marketing Strategy in a Crisis Playbook containing 10 points.

- 4 relate directly to the market and market research. **For** example, voter priorities change rapidly, as do perceptions of the government and leaders.
- The remaining 6 give stark warnings to political **leaders including** the need to be open to surprising data from up-to-date market research, and understand that problems overshadowed by a crisis do not disappear.

**This research considered the high point for Labour (2020) and our research shows how Labour's 2020 success dramatically reversed in 2023. So insight can be gained by asking two questions. First, what changed? Second, does the crisis playbook developed for the 2020 election apply to the 2023 post-crisis world?**

## Methodology

To assess political marketing by the Labour Government we review their behaviour from after the 2020 election to their 2023 election loss. Jacinda Ardern was Prime Minister, to January 2023 when Chris Hipkins succeeded her. The research analyses multiple sources of data including party policies and communications. **To find this we scoured and interpreted the communications of the Labour Party on social media and the New Zealand Government such as official press releases. While this is far from an impartial source it is effective for our goal, helping us understand the message the party was seeking to share. We used publicly available polling data which included press polls and polling on the key issues regularly conducted and shared by Ipsos. This is limited by what the third-party polling companies ask and their methods, however Ipsos is a reputable firm and the issues**



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3 they address have face validity and were relevant to the issues being discussed in New  
4 Zealand at the time.  
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8 Finally, we used original primary data collected from the large-scale public  
9 engagement survey, Vote Compass. This survey was run during the campaign. Respondents  
10 voluntarily shared their views on issues of the day and in return received a mapping advising  
11 which of the party's views they were closer to. This is a very popular survey in New Zealand  
12 and had several hundred thousand respondents in the lead up to the 2023 election. There  
13 was also a post-election survey allowing for better understanding choices on the day. The  
14 limitation here is that respondents voluntarily choose to respond. Thus, we cannot exclude  
15 self-selection bias as a concern. However, we would note that we seek a general  
16 understanding of voters' views; we are not seeking to establish a specific prediction of  
17 voting preferences in the future.  
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26 Analysis and interpretation were conducted manually. During data analysis all  
27 sources were thematically coded as to the extent to which it met the theoretical framework.  
28 Overall, these sources and methods align with previous edited studies of elections in the  
29 political marketing field in the US and UK (Gillies, 2018; Lilleker and Pack, 2016) but goes  
30 beyond with the added primary data from Vote Compass as per previous studies of New  
31 Zealand (Elder et al., 2022; Lees-Marshment, 2018; Lees-Marshment et al., 2015).  
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37 The context is that COVID-19 lockdowns continued into early December 2021 (Unite  
38 Against Covid 19, 2021) while associated restrictions remained into 2022. Fear of the  
39 pandemic faded by 2023 as new crises emerged: the global cost of living and New Zealand  
40 specific weather events (Auckland Anniversary Weekend **Floods** and Cyclone Gabrielle).  
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45 Adaptations have been made to the Political Marketing Strategy in a Crisis Playbook  
46 (Elder et al., 2022). The observations have also been reorganised into distinct aspects: voters  
47 and market conditions and best practice leadership response – see Table 1. **The**  
48 **modifications made including emphasising voters when noting that “overshadowed**  
49 **problems do not disappear”** (see item 8 below). We modified “market change is rapid” to  
50 focus on voter perceptions (item 2). The playbook held the observations “be open to  
51 surprising data from up-to-date market research” and “challenges need to be explained”.  
52 These are best practice recommendations and so we have treated them as such. Similarly,  
53 the playbook noted that “Messaging should emphasize the wins to show the crisis will end.”  
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We split that into an observation “voters want to see progress” (item 7) and moved the discussion of messaging to best practice.

Table 1. Framework for strategic political marketing during a crisis and its aftermath

	Voters and the market conditions	Best practice leadership response
1	Voter priorities change rapidly.	Conduct active market research to maintain understanding of public needs and be open to surprising data from up-to-date market research.
2	Voter perceptions of leaders and governments are open to change; established brand strengths may diminish.	Be ready for the popularity of leaders and governments to move significantly. Be prepared to change direction when needed, using emergent strategizing.
3	Voters have novel concerns.	Be seen to be listening and address the public’s novel concerns. Repeat concerns to show they have been heard. Be clear about how you are addressing them.
4	Crisis, by definition, means that no one has control.	Explain challenges limit action in certain situations. Explain that the government/the leader is not in control of events whenever control could not be achieved by any leader of government.
5	Voters want to know what they can do.	Encourage the nation to work together to defeat the mutual enemy, e.g., the cause of crisis. (Note cause does not need to be a person or people, but could be common enemy, e.g., Covid). Make it clear what voters can do; give them a way to participate and focus on <i>we</i> rather than <i>I</i>
6	Voters want reassurance.	Reassure voters, communicating a clear leadership structure and ensuring the leader is seen as strong and competent.
7	Voters want to see progress.	Celebrate and reinforce the successes achieved in the crisis. Explain how any partial wins that are highlighted are a vital stage to get to bigger wins.
8	Voters still encounter and see problems overshadowed problems by the crisis.	Don’t neglect on-going delivery. When crisis is over, popularity can fade quickly without a plan for tackling on-going problems. Set aside time to address neglected issues.

Source: adapted from Elder et al., (2022)

We assess the use of political marketing by Prime Ministers, Ardern and Hipkins, against this framework.

## Political marketing under Jacinda Ardern, October 2020-January 2023

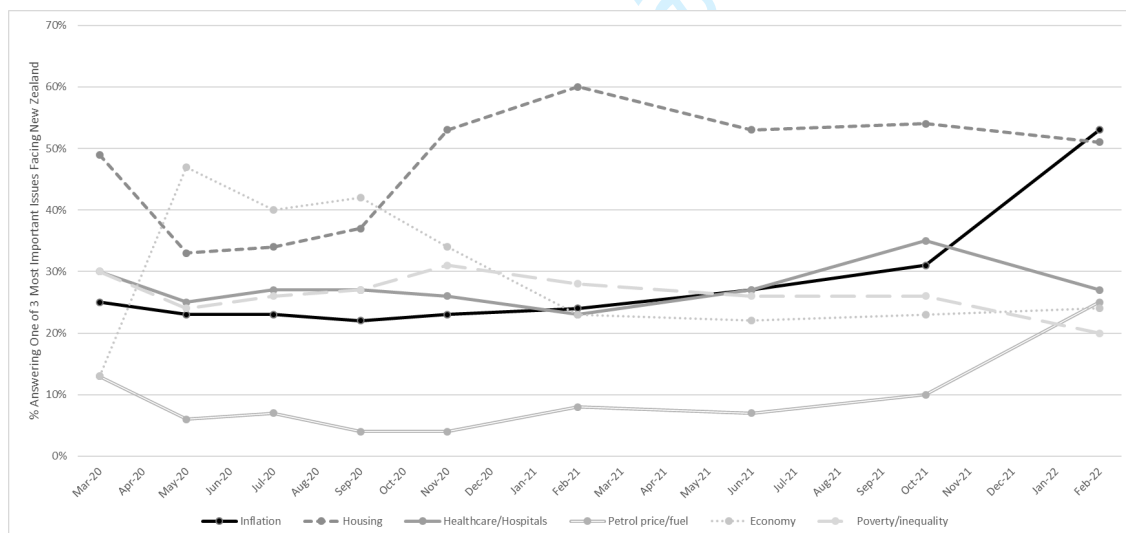
### *Changes in the market*

In 2020 the New Zealand Labour Party obtained an unprecedented victory under Jacinda Ardern's leadership. It was the first ever majority since MMP -- the mixed-member proportional representation electoral system -- had been introduced in New Zealand.

Ardern's likeability was very high, 78 per cent of voters believed that Labour offered policies that were responsive to New Zealanders and 77 per cent rated the Labour-led Government's handling of the pandemic as good. Indeed, 64 per cent thought Ardern would do the best job of managing the pandemic going forward (Lees-Marshment, 2021, pp 5-6).

However, as our framework suggests, post-election voters' concerns shifted dramatically. Arden's and her government's popularity declined substantially as inflation and the cost of living rose to become the top issue in February 2022 (Ipsos, 2022a) even eclipsing perennial concerns over the cost of housing (Figure 2).

*Figure 2. Ipsos survey: Key Issues*



*Source: Ipsos Key Issues Monitor (Ipsos, 2022c)*

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3 The framework advises being open to new market research, seen as listening, and  
4 focusing on addressing public concerns. Ardern, however, overtly disagreed that there was a  
5 crisis. When asked “Do we have a cost of living crisis?” and “So is it a crisis?”, Ardern replied:  
6 “I would not describe it that way. There is an impact that people are feeling, undeniably, but  
7 I would not describe it in that way”(Ardern, 2022a). A month later the government did  
8 respond somewhat by offering increases to the minimum wage, superannuation rates, and  
9 childcare assistant income thresholds, half price public transport and fuel tax cuts on petrol  
10 (Ardern, 2022c). However, again as the framework suggests, voter perception of Ardern and  
11 her government changed during 2022, as evident in the data discussed below.  
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### 20 *Evidence of a problem*

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23 Evidence from polling suggested the mood was turning against the Labour government.  
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#### 26 Parties most capable of managing top issues

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29 Confidence in Labour’s ability to manage top issues declined. **Figure 3 shows the issues**  
30 **deemed most important by New Zealanders** . Average ranking covers the entire period while  
31 importance in any given survey is shown by shape size. In June 2021 Labour was seen as  
32 most capable on 19 of the 20 most important issues, only the Māori Party beat them on  
33 ‘issues facing Māori’. By February 2022, Labour was overtaken by National on seven issues.  
34 In all three 2022 surveys the opposition - the National Party - was seen as consistently more  
35 capable on four of the six most important issues, including Housing and Inflation.  
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Figure 3. Which Party Is Most Capable at Managing Important Issues

Party Seen As Best On Issues Of Importance

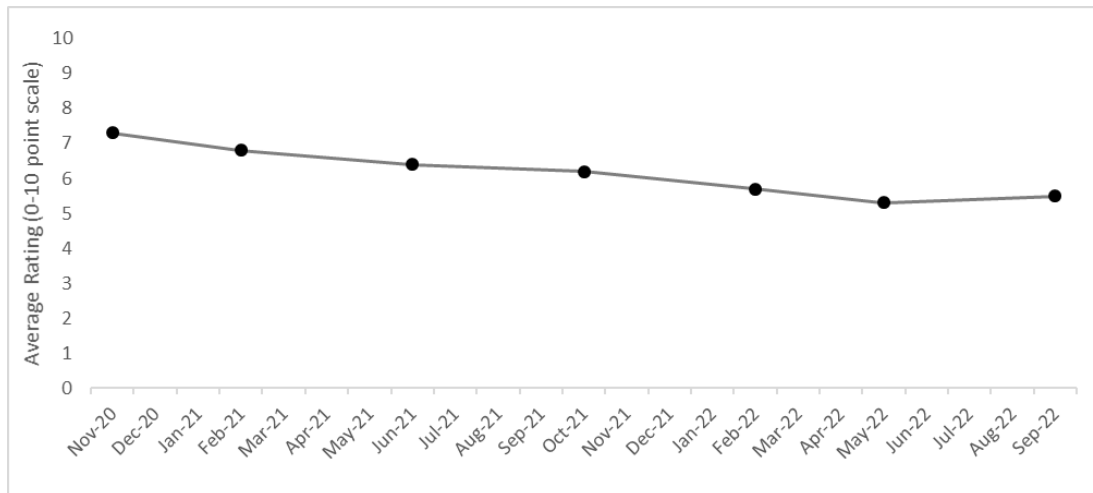
Party	○ Green	□ Labour	+ Māori	× National	* Labour/National	
Average Rank	Issue	Jun 21	Oct 21	Feb 22	May 22	Sep 22
1.6	Housing/Price of Housing	□	□	×	×	×
1.8	Inflation/Cost of Living	□	□	×	×	×
3.0	Healthcare/Hospitals	□	□	□	□	□
5.2	The Economy	□	□	×	×	×
5.2	Poverty/Inequality	□	□	□	□	□
5.6	Crime/Law & Order	□	□	×	×	×
7.0	Climate Change	□	○	○	○	○
7.8	Petrol Prices/Fuel	□	□	×	×	×
8.6	Environmental Pollution	□	○	○	○	○
9.6	Drug/Alcohol Abuse	□	□	□	□	□
11.4	Transport/Public Transport/Infrastructure	□	□	×	*	×
11.8	Education	□	□	□	□	□
11.8	Household/Personal Debt	□	□	□	×	×
13.4	Unemployment	□	□	□	□	□
13.8	Taxation	□	□	×	×	×
14.2	Race Relations/Racism	□	□	□	□	□
15.4	Immigration	□	□	□	*	×
16.8	Issues Facing Māori	+	+	+	+	+
18.0	Population/Overpopulation	□	□	□	×	×
20.0	Defence/Foreign Affairs	□	□	*	*	×

Source: Ipsos Key Issues Monitor (Ipsos, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c)

Perceptions of government performance declined

After its astonishing victory in 2020 perceptions of the government steadily decreased in the same Ipsos reports (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Rating of Labour Government



Source: Ipsos Key Issues Monitor (Ipsos, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c)

Polling in April 2022 showed that voter perceptions of the Labour government's action on the cost of living were poor, 77% saying that it had not done enough (15.2% it had). Even 60.1% of Labour voters said the government hadn't done enough (26.6% it had) (Newshub, 2022).

### Preferred Prime Minister Ratings

Ardern's popularity plummeted during 2022, with multiple polls showing a decline in her lead over the National Party leader, Christopher Luxon (Kantar, 2022a, 2022b; Lynch, 2022a, 2022d; Verian, 2023). This was despite Luxon's own polling never reaching very high levels; the highest being 23.9%.

### Response by the Prime Minister

Jacinda Ardern's response to the decline in polls – at least in public – failed to convey understanding. She argued the polling decline reflected general circumstances:

*"It has been a really difficult period for New Zealand and then of course, by default, that makes it a difficult period to govern through."*

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3 In these remarks there was little sense of a response or reflection. Instead, the  
4 reaction was she was not going to change:  
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8 *“There will be from time to time tough decisions that need to be made, and if that*  
9 *means that we take a bit of a hit in the numbers, so long as we stand by all the*  
10 *decisions we’ve made - and we do – then that’s a price we are willing to pay.”* (Lynch,  
11  
12 2022c)  
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15  
16 By November 2022, Ardern was noting that the cost of living was a problem (Lynch,  
17 2022b) but still risked being seen as dismissive, saying of polls, “I take every single one of  
18 them with a grain of salt...instead of focusing on the difference in the polls, I focus on our  
19 people.”(Ardern, 2022d)  
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23 As the framework suggests, crises limit government control. Best practice is for  
24 leaders to explain the limitations and challenges while changing direction where necessary.  
25 Ardern’s Government noted the challenges but remained focused on COVID-19, failing to  
26 create a clear new strategy.  
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31 In February 2022, the Prime Minister’s statement on priorities for the year started  
32 by referencing the pandemic, remarking that, “New Zealand enters a third challenging year  
33 confronting the global pandemic, better prepared than many other countries to chart a path  
34 through the disruption and beyond into the recovery.” It devoted the first 5 of 22 pages to  
35 the pandemic (Ardern, 2022b) and concluded:  
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41 *“This Government has provided stable, united leadership through the most*  
42 *challenging times New Zealand has had to face in modern times.”*  
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46 In 2021 during lockdowns this was logical. But 2022’s focus failed to change with  
47 voters’ priorities (Ardern, 2022b). The government did issue new priorities in mid-2022, but  
48 the top two were still COVID-19 related: ‘Keeping New Zealanders safe from COVID-19’ and  
49 ‘Securing our economic recovery’ post COVID-19 (Labour, n.d.). Ardern’s Facebook remained  
50 focused on the disease through 2021 and into 2022 (Ardern, n.d.).  
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55 Ardern’s leadership style emphasised helping voters to see what they can do and  
56 encouraging the nation to work together during the crisis, but was less clear about how to  
57 emerge from the pandemic. She took a collective approach in terms of talking of the  
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3 importance of being kind, noting, “If I could distil it down into one concept that we are  
4 pursuing in New Zealand it is simple and it is this: Kindness.”(Labour Party Website, 2022)  
5 She also wove this into speeches, talking of meeting the challenge together:  
6  
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8  
9 *“The past two years have tested New Zealanders in ways we have not seen for many*  
10 *decades. Just as generations before us have met the uninvited hardships of global*  
11 *events, together we have risen to the challenge.” (Ardern, 2022b)*  
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15 But this approach did not permeate discussion of the cost of living crisis or on-going  
16 challenges such as housing affordability and child poverty.  
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19 The framework suggests leaders reassure voters, convey strong leadership,  
20 celebrate progress and pay attention to longstanding issues and delivery. The disadvantage  
21 of talking about crises being global and beyond leaders’ control is that this is less reassuring  
22 for voters and fails to convey strength and competence. Public perceptions of Ardern’s  
23 performance as leader declined after the 2020 election; and by November 2022 only 47.3  
24 percent thought Ardern had performed well, whilst 38 percent said she had performed  
25 poorly (Lynch, 2022d).  
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33 Continuing to focus on COVID-19 in 2022 drew focus away from progress on  
34 delivering on everyday issues such as housing and child poverty. The 2020-23 government  
35 was also hindered by their ineffective delivery marketing when they failed to offer a clear  
36 product (Elder and Lees-Marshment, 2021) policy promises lacked priorities and there was  
37 no 100 day plan. Although they set up an implementation unit (Department of the Prime  
38 Minister and Cabinet, 2021), this failed to drive or communicate progress as the UK Blair’s  
39 Delivery Unit under Michael Barber did.  
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46 That’s not to say the party didn’t try to convey success. They did, but it was  
47 ineffective and failed to follow delivery marketing guidelines (Esselment, 2012a). For  
48 example, the Labour Party Facebook page used images containing statistics about inputs,  
49 rather than showing the impact on people’s lives, and lacked memorable moments (Labour  
50 Party, 2022). The party website offered a long, meandering list which failed to differentiate  
51 between the 2020-23 and 2017-20 governments, (Labour, n.d.) and illustrated with numbers  
52 rather than people-friendly terms (LabourVoices, 2022).  
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3 In early January 2023, Ardern announced her resignation. Her statement noted the  
4 multiple crises and how they “had to respond to a major biosecurity incursion, a domestic  
5 terror attack, a volcanic eruption and a one in one-hundred year global pandemic and  
6 ensuing economic crisis” (Beehive.govt.nz, 2023). It hinted at being influenced by polling as  
7 she hoped to be a leader “who knows when it’s time to go”. In this final act, she did show  
8 responsiveness to market research.  
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### 13 14 15 **Political marketing under Chris Hipkins, January-October 2023** 16

#### 17 18 *Listening from the New Prime Minister* 19

20  
21 Chris Hipkins took over as Prime Minister at the end of January 2023. Hipkins was a key  
22 minister under Ardern and thus this did not represent a major re-branding. Nevertheless,  
23 upon becoming Prime Minister, Hipkins did initially show awareness of voters’ priorities and  
24 concerns, and repeatedly noted voter concerns about cost of living.  
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30 On the 22<sup>nd</sup> January he made reassuring comments, often offering empathy for the  
31 challenges the public faced, noting that, “I know that many people in New Zealand, many  
32 families, are struggling at the moment; I know that people are worried about paying their  
33 grocery bills and paying their mortgages” (1News, 2023a). And he announced new priorities  
34 in response to voters concerns:  
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39 *“...I know that some New Zealanders feel that we are doing too much too fast, and I*  
40 *have heard that message. Over the coming week, Cabinet will be making decisions on*  
41 *reigning in some projects and programmes that aren’t essential right now.”* (1News,  
42  
43 2023a)  
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47 On the 23 January he noted the challenges: “New Zealand is part of a bigger global  
48 picture here, and inflation is one of those things” and that “there aren’t instant answers.”  
49 (1News, 2023b)  
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53 But he repeated that his government would focus on voter concerns:  
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3 *"... their grocery bills; their power bills; their mortgage interest rates. Those are things*  
4 *that kiwi families are really focused on and they want to know that the Government's*  
5 *got their back."*  
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9 *"I do want to reassure New Zealanders is we've heard that they want to see us*  
10 *focused on those core issues."*  
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14 *"I've set out really clearly where my areas of focus will be; they will be on those core*  
15 *issues that New Zealanders are focused on at the moment." (1News, 2023b)*  
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18 A press release confirmed that his government would focus on bread and butter  
19 issues:  
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23 *"...Over the coming days and weeks you will see us put words into action, with policies*  
24 *to support New Zealanders by reprioritising existing programmes to free up resources*  
25 *to help with the cost of living." (Prime Minister, 2023d)*  
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29 His government provided a list of initiatives being stopped, including biofuels  
30 mandates, amendments to the human rights bills, a social insurance scheme; a media  
31 merger, as well as an unpopular reorganisation of public water supply. This was "...in order  
32 to put the Government's focus on the cost of living" (Prime Minister, 2023b). Whilst this  
33 stopped action, it did not suggest alternatives. Communication made clear that the old  
34 direction was halted, but the new direction was never made clear.  
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40 Further deferrals were announced in March, such the social leasing car and clean car  
41 upgrade schemes, legislation to lower the voting age to 16, alcohol reform, and other  
42 transport programmes (Prime Minister, 2023a). Again, this failed to convey an alternative  
43 vision.  
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48 The government also issued a package in March 2023 that meant approximately 1.4  
49 million people benefited from increased assistance to help with the cost of living (Prime  
50 Minister & Deputy Prime Minister, 2023). Communications around this talked of how "we  
51 know Kiwis are feeling the bite from the rising cost of living" (New Zealand Labour Party,  
52 2023c) and continued through April when the benefit changes were implemented (New  
53 Zealand Labour Party, 2023d).  
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3 The May 2023 budget was branded by Hipkins as a 'no-frills budget' and  
4 accompanied by empathetic messaging (Prime Minister, 2023e). For example, in a Facebook  
5 video, Hipkins said, "I know things are tough right now for many families. That's why we're  
6 focused on bread and butter issues like the cost of living" (New Zealand Labour Party,  
7 2023b). The Finance Minister Grant Robertson said "this year's budget is about doing the  
8 right thing by New Zealanders who are facing cost of living pressures."  
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### 14 *Need to Show Progress*

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18 Where Hipkins fell down was not taking enough substantial action in response to  
19 those concerns. The policy announcements mostly repeated or extended measures such as  
20 increased benefit payments and lower cost public transport, which likely generated little  
21 impact on voter perception given such initiatives had already been enacted under Ardern in  
22 April 2022. Whilst reinforcing the same messages is normally regarded as good  
23 communication practice, voters need to see actual improvements in their finances. A poll  
24 shortly after the Budget asked if voters thought it would be effective in addressing recent  
25 increases in the cost of living, 60% said no, only 26% yes (Desmarais, 2023).  
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33 More positively, Hipkins improved perceptions of leadership. The framework warns  
34 that voter perceptions of leaders and governments change and so brand strengths may  
35 diminish, but they can improve. Taking over from Ardern, Hipkins boosted the Preferred  
36 Prime Minister ratings. The Labour leader's lead reduced by the election and the opposition  
37 leader never gained a meaningful lead (Verian, 2023).  
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42 Branding himself (Hipkins, 2023a) as 'the boy from the Hutt' (an area with relatively  
43 low socio-economic demographics), who liked sausage rolls even when meeting monarchs  
44 and world leaders, he was seen as more trusted and likeable than both Ardern and the  
45 leader of the main opposition National party, Christopher Luxon. A majority, 52.9 percent,  
46 said they trusted Hipkins, while only 36.9 percent said they trusted Luxon (Lynch, 2023).  
47 Vote Compass data showed that Hipkins was the most likeability leader of all party leaders,  
48 his 4.9 compared with Luxon's 3.8 (Vox Pop Labs, 2023a).  
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55 However Hipkin's government was hit by a new domestic crisis: floods and a cyclone  
56 which damaged Auckland, New Zealand's biggest city, and Hawkes Bay, the nation's biggest  
57 food producing area. This put the government onto another crisis footing. Hipkins  
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3 attempted to offer reassurance, made sure to see the devastation the floods caused in  
4 Auckland and promised government support. Similarly visiting Hawke's Bay to review the  
5 cyclone response and recovery efforts, (Hipkins, 2023b) he set up a new Extreme Weather  
6 Recovery Committee (Prime Minister, 2023c), later noting:  
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11 *"The photos we see on the news and in the paper just don't do it justice. It's hard not*  
12 *to be moved when seeing the damage first hand, and impossible not to be moved*  
13 *when hearing directly from those affected."* (Hipkins, 2023b)  
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17 The framework advises that voters will still want problems overshadowed by crisis  
18 to be dealt with. Governments should not neglect on-going delivery because popularity can  
19 fade quickly without a plan for tackling on-going problems. Unfortunately, Labour could not  
20 seem to set aside time to address neglected issues and failed to create and communicate a  
21 sense of a new strategy or vision.  
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27 The first policy announced for 2023 (May) was not new –leaving the state pension  
28 age unaltered (LabourVoices, 2023a). In July, Hipkins abandoned a new wealth tax, which  
29 the government had been exploring given an Inland Revenue study which found the  
30 wealthiest families paid less than half the amount of tax compared to other New Zealanders  
31 (RNZ, 20223). Vote Compass data showed there was significant public support (68%) for  
32 wealthier people paying more in taxes generally (Vox Pop Labs, 2023b). In August, Labour  
33 announced a new policy to remove GST from fruit and veg (LabourVoices, 2023c), but  
34 support for this specific measure was not strong: only 36% strongly agreed with the policy  
35 (Vox Pop Labs, 2023b). The 2023 election manifesto was also launched very late, only 14  
36 days before voting day (LabourVoices, 2023b) which meant that the Hipkins new product  
37 offering was not clearly visible.  
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46 What made matters worse was that - as the framework predicts - voter priorities  
47 changed again. By May 2023, concern about crime/law & order rose to a record high level,  
48 with 40% of New Zealanders identifying it as a top issue (Ipsos, 2023a). It remained second  
49 out of the top five issues until the election (Ipsos, 2023b).  
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54 Hipkins initially expressed concern about the rise in crime, specifically against local  
55 diary (corner shop) owners, noting that it was "heartbreaking" (Newstalk ZB / NZ Herald,  
56 2023). However, policy announcements to tackle this made nearer the election were  
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3 confused and therefore unconvincing. Hipkins initially announced a new offence for adults  
4 inciting youth to commit crime but his office issued a correction less than two hours later,  
5 saying they would make this an aggravating factor in sentencing rather than a new offence  
6 (RNZ, 2023). Conveying strong leadership and a clear leadership structure is also a  
7 component of the framework, this was not successful.  
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13 Compounding problems were a series of ministerial resignations from March  
14 through to July, some due to unethical behaviour. First came Stuart Nash (communications  
15 with donors), Mega Waitiri left the Labour Party, then Michael Wood resigned (holding  
16 shares related to his portfolio), and finally, the Minister for Justice, Kiri Allen, was taken into  
17 police custody after crashing her car (Prime Minister, 2023f).  
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22 By August 2023, Labour was no longer the party seen as most capable of managing  
23 most of voters' top issues. From holding leads in 19 of 20 issues (Figure 3), it dropped to  
24 only hold a lead dealing with Poverty/Inequality and Race/Racism, while ratings of the  
25 government performance declined further to 4.5 by August (Ipsos, 2023b). It was hard for  
26 voters to see progress, even though the party did try to communicate and reinforce their  
27 successes (New Zealand Labour Party, 2023a). Rather than bringing the voters onto the  
28 team, the 2023 election campaign slogan "In it for you" focused on voters as individuals and  
29 distanced them from Labour (Hipkins, n.d.).  
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### 37 *Election defeat for Labour*

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41 In the October 2023 election, Labour suffered one of their worst election defeats,  
42 securing only 26.91% of the vote and 34 seats. Compared to 50% and 65 seats in 2020, this  
43 dramatic and profound decline partially reflected their ineffective use of market research in  
44 their political marketing strategy.  
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48 Whilst there are always multiple factors behind election results, it should be noted  
49 that the outcome was not driven by a superior opposition. National's leader, Christopher  
50 Luxon, was not preferred as prime minister to Hipkins. His likeability was lower not just than  
51 Hipkins but all other National Party leaders since Vote Compass data began in 2014 (1News,  
52 2023c). Over 43% of voters did not trust Luxon, compared with only 26.9% who did not trust  
53 Hipkins (Lynch, 2023). Moreover, when asked, "Who do you think better understands the  
54 struggles average Kiwis are facing?" 41.2 percent said Labour's Chris Hipkins, only 29.3  
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percent said Luxon, while 23 percent said neither (Burr, 2023). Indeed, the % of the vote secured was also the lowest of any winning National leader, and even less than when they did not win control of the government in 2017, see Table 2.

*Table 2. National Party performance (NZ Electoral Commission, 2023)*

	<b>% of votes</b>	<b>Seats</b>	<b>Won control of government</b>
<b>2008</b>	45%	58	Yes
<b>2011</b>	47%	59	Yes
<b>2014</b>	47%	60	Yes
<b>2017</b>	44.4%	56	
<b>2020</b>	25.6%	33	
<b>2023</b>	38.1%	48	Yes

### Vote Compass post-election survey

Over twenty thousand responded to the Vote Compass post-election survey, but weighting brought the effective sample to 2,910. We looked at four questions, each asked about Chris Hipkins and Christopher Luxon.

In your opinion

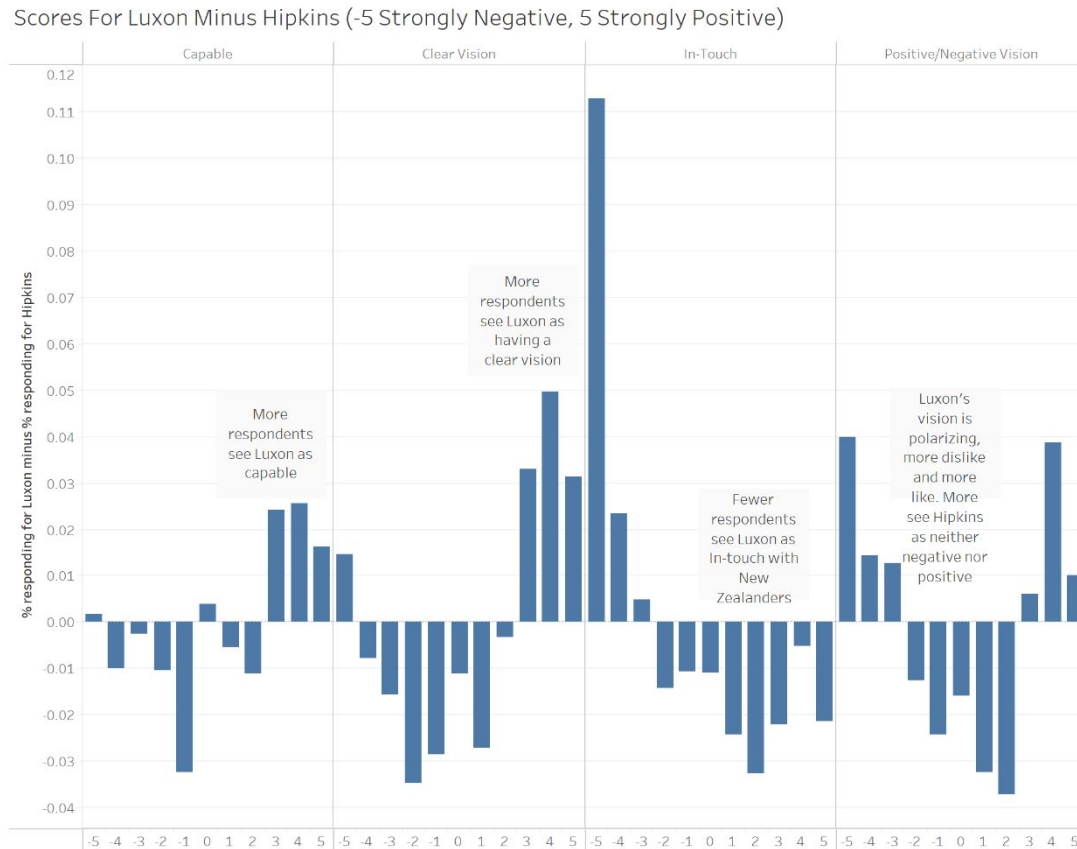
- .....to what degree did [leader] convey a positive or negative vision for New Zealand?
- .....to what degree did [leader] convey a clear vision for New Zealand?
- .....how in touch [was leader] with ordinary people's concerns?
- .....how capable [was leader] of delivering on their promises?

Figure 5 shows the scores for Luxon minus Hipkins to allow for contrasts of the two leaders. Luxon was seen as more capable having a clear vision. Many did not especially like Luxon's vision but it was clear. Hipkins on the other hand was seen as more in-touch but failed to articulate a clear vision. Hipkins was seen as more in touch but failed to offer a clear vision. Thus, whilst he had done market research and 'listened', he had not used it to strategically plan and create a new vision. It was listening without a purpose. Listening is a vital step in market research, but it must lead to action to tackle the problems it uncovers.

Focusing on their own party supporters, Luxon got 89.8% of National Party supporters to answer 1-5 on clear vision (80.8% on 2-5). Hipkins only got 81.9% to answer 1-

5 on clear vision (only 69.7% on 2-5). His own supporters did not give him high marks for clear vision.

Figure 5. Vote Compass post-election survey results



Source: Authors, using Vote Compass data

This points to Hipkins as suffering from a similar fate that dogged George H.W. Bush, he simply wasn't seen as having "the vision thing" (Ajemian, 1987).

## Discussion

This research has explored the market research and strategic reasons behind the dramatic decline in support for the New Zealand Labour Government from winning 50% of the vote in 2020 to just 27% in 2023 and applied a playbook developed for the 2020 election. Firstly, the case confirmed that voter priorities can change rapidly, from COVID-19

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3 at the end of 2020, to inflation/cost of living in 2022, and in 2023 crime rose to be the  
4 second most important issue.  
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8 Secondly, leaders cannot afford to deny voters' concerns, even if the problem is not  
9 of their making. Refusing to acknowledge public priorities only makes them seem out of  
10 touch. Whilst it can make sense to note that crises bring challenges outside the control of a  
11 leader, voters still want action to manage them. Voters want reassurance, and a prime  
12 minister merely admitting they are buffeted by global events beyond the government's  
13 control is hardly reassuring.  
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19 Thirdly, perceptions of governments and leaders are open to change quickly, for the  
20 better or worse. This can be seen in perceptions of the government's capability to manage  
21 top issues, ratings of government performance, preferred prime ministerial ratings and  
22 likeability. Just because a leader starts a government term with high popularity does not  
23 prevent it falling rapidly – as was the case with Jacinda Ardern.  
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29 Whilst a new leader can enjoy a boost in the polls by listening and communicating  
30 this, they need to match rhetoric with action. Otherwise they will only disappoint voters - as  
31 happened with Ardern's successor, Chris Hipkins. It's important but not enough to stop  
32 unpopular actions. Hipkins was seen as more in-touch but seemed to lack vision. To show  
33 progress, a leader must create and communicate a new strategy. Even if a new leader is well  
34 respected and preferred over the opposition, they will be unable to maintain voter support  
35 without offering a fresh product designed to meet the voter needs identified through  
36 market research. Market research showed that a wealth tax was popular but this was not  
37 pursued, yet the less popular removal of the sales tax on fruit and vegetables was.  
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45 The lessons for political marketing from this research are that parties in power need  
46 to continue to conduct market research to keep abreast of sudden changes in voter views  
47 and priorities. Furthermore, they need to respond with clear action that addresses the  
48 problem and fresh proposals when seeking re-election. Although crisis can derail strategic  
49 thinking, given the prevalence of crisis, both global and national governments need to  
50 ensure they protect strategic thinking despite the too-frequent occurrence of crisis.  
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56 There are also lessons beyond politics. Much has been discussed about managing in  
57 VUCA environments, characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity  
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(Bennett and Lemoine, 2014). The 2020-2023 Labour government saw dramatic changes in its market. From unprecedented popularity the government lost to a challenger that was far from popular itself, as crime and inflation became central to voters' perceptions. The warnings for business are that public sentiment always changes somewhat. Leaders must keep up with what the public wants, and market research is central to this.

A second business lesson is that issues come and go. Problems arise that take center stage, such as COVID-19 or a product recall crisis for a business. Solving these demands requires dedicated attention, but after the crisis the on-going challenges remain, some super-charged by the crisis, and these need to be tackled. Businesses must continue progress across the board during a crisis or at least have a strategy for a quick pivot back to the on-going issues once the crisis has been resolved. Voters and consumers expect to be offered something going forward, and credit for past successes won't last long.

Thirdly, the sort of listening facilitated by excellent market research is a vital step, but it is also critical how the information is used. Successful market research is about making a positive impact upon the world. Market research should inform decisions and help create a vision to tackle the needs of voters, consumers, and the general public. When done well, market research is the foundation upon which effective marketing and management is built.

## Conclusion

It is vital for governments to continue to seek to understand voter concerns. The period from 2020-23 was a turbulent one but the Labour Party failed to comprehend and react to the changes in voter priorities. This helped contribute to a dramatic decline in support.

The playbook developed by Elder et al., (2022) was helpful in understanding the problems facing Labour in 2023. It is worth noting that there are always limitations to any study. The playbook was specific to New Zealand in 2020 and so was adapted to a 2023 context. To be applied at a different time in a different place further adaptation will likely be necessary.

This research speaks to the period 2020-23, but this may have been uniquely turbulent and the experiences of New Zealand in response to the Covid pandemic were

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3 quite different to many other countries. In marketing it is always important to understand  
4 local political context. Nevertheless, it still emphasises the importance of both collecting and  
5 utilising appropriate market research in decisions and behavior.  
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For Peer Review

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