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Vote Compass in the 2014 New Zealand election: Hearing the voice of New Zealand Voters

Article for submission to a Special Issue of Political Science on the 2014 New Zealand General Election

Introduction

The 2014 General Election in New Zealand saw the nation's first implementation of Vote Compass—an online voter education tool aimed at increasing voter engagement with the electoral process. Initially developed in Canada, academics from the University of Auckland and Victoria University helped adapt the platform to the New Zealand context by formulating questions that reflected current issues relevant to the nation's voters. In the end, over 330,000 New Zealanders went online to answer 30 issue-based questions and receive a summary of how close their views were to 10 political parties competing in the election. The collective data provided Television New Zealand (TVNZ) with detailed insight into voters' views which could be related to party policies and campaign events – something not possible with standard opinion polls due to the costs associated with covering such a diverse range of issues.

In this article, we firstly explain the nature of Vote Compass, then discuss it within the context of the existing academic literature on voting advice applications. We then briefly detail the creation of the New Zealand edition of Vote Compass and provide a summary report of the main survey and political marketing related questions derived from a post-election survey. Next, we offer our interpretations of what Vote Compass means for party responsiveness and political marketing and the important lessons the 2014 Vote Compass data have to offer the elected government and opposition parties. Specifically, Vote Compass data suggest that, despite National's electoral victory, public opinion on specific policy positions are less in line with National than implied by the outcome of the election. We conclude by summarising the main lessons derived from the Vote Compass data before adding further comments about the potential contributions the tool makes to voter engagement and democracy as a whole.

Vote Compass: the tool and its purpose

Vote Compass is one of several online tools utilised in elections around the world. 'Voting Advice Applications' (VAAs) like Vote Compass have become a feature of elections in Europe over the last decade or so. They began in the Netherlands, offline, in 1989, but gathered momentum after moving online in 1998. At least three variations of VAAs have been applied across a variety of countries, using somewhat different methods. The extent of their effectiveness and use involves partnering with a major media outlet, such as a widely watched television channel. In this sense, they form a significant partnership between old and new media. An extensive literature on their use has emerged, reporting their findings, analyzing their methods, and raising important questions about their use and effects.¹ Yet their use outside of Europe, and in particular, countries in 'the new world', has been relatively recent. VAAs are claimed to enhance voter engagement and to help address well-known knowledge deficits in the mass electorate. They can also challenge parties to more explicitly state their policies. As such, they intervene in the political process, thereby raising ethical questions that have come to the fore following recent controversies over the use of experimental research.²

One can argue that Vote Compass is more of an engagement device than an advisory tool, because its primary purpose is to increase voters' interest in politics during elections: a more appropriate term to describe it is 'Voter Engagement Application (VEA)'. Vote Compass is an interactive electoral

¹ Diego Garzia and Stefan Marschall, ed. *Matching Voters with Parties and Candidates* (Colchester, ECPR Press 2014) addresses many of these issues in various chapters and provides a useful introduction to this literature.

² See, in particular, the controversy surrounding a Montana study that prompted voters with the ideological positions of candidates in nonpartisan judicial contests. See http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/29/upshot/professors-research-project-stirs-political-outrage-in-montana.html?_r=0&abt=0002&abg=0, accessed March 13 2015.

literacy application that approximates a user's policy alignment with the various parties contesting a given election race. Because Vote Compass' datasets are substantially larger than any existing campaign-based public opinion data, they offer unprecedented research opportunities into areas that have previously been inaccessible to social scientists. It also serves as a catalyst for citizen engagement in election campaigns. According to deliberative democratic theory, elections should provide the opportunity to debate and discuss the issues. However, media commentary often focuses on billboards, television advertising, scandals and politicians' hair, clothes or family. The goal of Vote Compass is to increase the focus that deliberative democratic theory³ emphasises as most important – the issues and policies. Moreover, Vote Compass provides voters with the chance to say what they think about these issues, consider what parties promise to do about them, and discover which party's policies are closest to their preferences. Vote Compass gives voters the chance to go online, anywhere/anyplace/any time that suits them, and answer a short battery of 30 questions about their views on a range of issues. Their responses to these items are then compared with the policies offered by the parties in the election. As such, Vote Compass allows potential voters to identify which parties come closest to their own issue positions, thereby simplifying the often complex process of gathering information about each specific party competing in a given election. This also provides candidates with an important feedback loop whereby the electorate's views can be incorporated into public policies.

Vote Compass was developed by Canadian political scientists from Vox Pop Labs and is run in conjunction with a media sponsor and country-based academics. It has been used in several countries' elections including the 2013 Australian elections in conjunction with the Australian Broadcast Corporation (ABC); the 2012 US Presidential election with the Wall Street Journal; and the 2011 Canadian federal elections in conjunction with Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC). Each edition of Vote Compass consists of a three-part team: methodological and operative specialists, academic experts on issues relevant to the given country; and national media. The Canadian Vote Compass team are the methodological specialists who create the tool and manage the data it produces. Within each application of Vote Compass, these specialists work with academic experts in that country who offer balanced judgments about relevant issues and party policies. Finally, country-based media sponsors recruit voters to use the tool by advertising the study and reporting the results during regular broadcasts. The process from beginning to end is very iterative and involves in-depth discussions with the different parts of the team to ensure that decisions made about the final questions asked, party positions, and interpretations of the data are as robust as possible.

Vote Compass uses traditional survey questions that employ a Likert scale to avoid pigeonholing party policies - and voters - into binary categories.

- Survey items in Vote Compass are designed to reflect propositions that are salient in the public discourse at the time of the election;
- Some items reflect a left-leaning position, whereas others a right-leaning position;
- The final set of items are designed to reflect issue-positions that fall across the entire ideological spectrum, thereby maximizing the battery's ability to differentiate between various parties' stances;
- The items do not assume that a certain policy is right or wrong; they simply posit a position in such a way that users can agree or disagree with the statement.

Despite Vote Compass' various strengths, there are several methodological limitations that should be noted. For one, the primary aim of Vote Compass is to stimulate voter engagement. It is open to all who wish to participate and, as such, consists of self-selected participants. Because the sample is non-random, attempts to generalize results to the general population must be made with caution. Indeed, given the self-selected nature of the sample, one can expect biases towards those with some interest in

³ For an example of this rich literature see Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton University Press 2004).

politics. It is also likely that the sample is slightly more educated than the general population; under-representative of those with decided political preferences; and over-representative those with lower political knowledge. Acknowledging these limitations, it is worth noting that surveys based on random samples with low response rates usually suffer from at least some of these limitations, too. Furthermore, there are ways of overcoming the problem. Data can be weighted according to census data distributions on socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, education, religion, and industry of work. Critically, in the New Zealand version of Vote Compass, census data from Statistics New Zealand can be used to weight the sample based on whether a respondent is Māori in order to approximate a representative sample of the population. Indeed, the weighted distribution of political party voting intentions among pre-election Vote Compass respondents was very similar to the distribution reported by other polls conducted during the campaign. Nevertheless, weighting non-random sample data is as much an art as a science, and – like for all online surveys - there are no guarantees that all sampling biases can be corrected. Also, because of the large sample size (i.e., 125,529 usable observations), even trivial relationships identified in Vote Compass data will be statistically significant. As such, performing statistical significance tests on the full sample would be uninformative in many instances. Thus, the data need to be interpreted with care and compared to other sources, including other surveys. But overall, Vote Compass seeks to be as scientific as possible whilst being accessible to voters.

Another limitation to Vote Compass data is that the items asked in the survey must be simplified in order to engage as many people as possible. Indeed, although items were written to span across the left and the right of both economic and social policy dimensions, the questions included in the survey were constructed to be in language that citizens would use themselves. For example, rather than using the phrase ‘capital gains tax excluding the family home’, the question Vote Compass posed was whether or not people agreed that ‘landlords should pay more tax on the sale of their rental properties’. A standard survey question would use the phrase ‘capital gains tax’ to pick up a phrase regularly appearing in campaign discourse: Vote Compass chose to frame the question so that it would be understood by potential respondents who were relatively unexposed to the campaign. Nevertheless, survey items focused on issues that yielded between party differences that were both apparent and salient during the election.

For the most part, Vote Compass questions were also designed to ‘match’ with party policies. This feature of Vote Compass sets it apart from traditional election studies. To achieve these ends, party positions are sourced from party policy statements and checked with the various parties. Often, party policy statements are unclear, or parties disagree with the characterisation of their positions. Because the final information needs to be accessible to voters online, Vote Compass necessarily distils complex policies and issue positions into simple survey items, thereby sacrificing some of the nuances of party policy in order to establish a standardised framework for comparing party positions on a range of salient issues. If voters want to know more about the nuance of a policy within the tool, they can access the original source/full text the researchers used to assess the position of the given party in question and find out more about a given issue in the results module. Moreover, voters can search out additional information from parties themselves. Indeed, one of the primary objectives of Vote Compass is to encourage people to become informed voters.

Vote Compass in New Zealand in 2014

A range of people and skills are involved in creating each edition of Vote Compass, which consists of three core teams: country issue experts and academic adjudicators; methodology and operation by Vote Compass staff; communication and public engagement by the media partner. In New Zealand, the main academic advisory team consisted of Jennifer Lees-Marshment and Danny Osborne from Auckland University and Jack Vowles from Victoria University. Maria Bargh (also from Victoria) added additional feedback on the final question wording and assessment of Māori and Mana party positions. The role of these local academics was to provide impartial advice on the questions that might be asked to ensure the survey was a good fit to the New Zealand context and would cover issues important to voters in the election, adjudicate on party positions when there was a difference between party self-codes and researchers’ assessment of the given party’s position, as well as

providing exclusive media commentary on the data produced by Vote Compass during the campaign. Victoria University and its I-Predict Team provided research assistants to identify party positions on the questions and Auckland University hosted a workshop where an initial 80 questions were devised. These items were then piloted on a group of voters and reduced to 30 items that met strict inclusion criteria.

Canadian Vote Compass staff oversaw the project, brought together the different parts of the team, analysed the crowd sourcing data on issues, piloted and decided on the final questions, created the tool, collected the data and analysed the survey responses to produce data reports sent to the academics and media during the campaign. The media partner was TVNZ. They ran a crowd sourcing campaign to identify topical issues for inclusion in the survey, advertised the tool to voters, and then produced and broadcasted both televised and online reports about the data. The local academics also contributed to these endeavours by interpreting the data and finding the 'kiwi story' from the numbers. In terms of finances, the whole project was funded by TVNZ, the Electoral Commission and the two universities.

The New Zealand edition of Vote Compass included 10 parties: National, Labour, Green, NZ First, Māori, Internet, Mana, United Future, ACT, and Conservative. By default, Vote Compass includes those political parties that were represented within a given jurisdiction's elected body at the conclusion of its previous election. If a political party does not satisfy this first condition, it may also be included if it meets all of the following conditions: a) it is registered under the jurisdiction's elections commission; b) it fields a full slate of candidates; and c) it has a fully-developed platform. However, Vote Compass had never ran an application in a proportional electoral system with several small parties. As such, discussions during the question-writing workshop (held in June of 2014) led to an expansion of the inclusion criteria. Specifically, the merger between the Mana party (a party that was represented in parliament at the time) and the newly-formed Internet party made it difficult to justify excluding the latter party from the survey. Including the Internet Party led to the inclusion of the Conservative Party which, at the time, was polling more strongly than several of the small parties represented in Parliament (despite lacking parliamentary representation). Due to the large number of parties, as well as the fact that some of these parties were new to the scene and had yet to announce policies on all of the issues, the question selection and coding of party positions was a difficult process. Researchers were unable to find enough sufficient publicly available information about the Internet and Conservative policies to be able to code them appropriately before the campaign began. Nevertheless, after the launch of Vote Compass, the parties provided self-coded positions which were checked by the academics and eventually included in the device. The inclusion of 10 parties made the NZ edition the most complex Vote Compass to date.

Additional data were obtained through questions on issue importance, evaluations of the specific party leaders and queries about events that emerged during the campaign. Likewise, an open-ended question asked respondents to state what issues were most important in their own words. A dictionary file was developed and used to analyse and code these free-response entries into established categories. Users were also asked to use a feeling thermometer to rate their feelings towards each of the party leaders. During the campaign, additional questions of the day were added to the tool to capture events such as televised leader debates and issues that developed during the campaign.

Respondents were asked to provide information about their partisanship, gender, education, income, religion, ideological position, birth year, immigration status and geographical location in terms of South or North Island. These items allowed us to obtain greater insight into the views of New Zealanders, such as the profile of a typical supporter for a particular party, or if there were any sections of society with distinctive perspectives.

Respondents to Vote Compass were also asked if they would like to participate in another survey after the conclusion of the election. If they so volunteered, they were asked to provide their email address.

This resulted in 14,167 participants who completed a post-election survey (PES).⁴ While a much smaller subset of the overall sample, the PES sample is still far larger than most public opinion polls. Critically, the PES asked (among other things) if respondents thought the leaders offered a positive and clear vision, were in touch with ordinary people, if party policies were seen as deliverable, and if the parties' responded to the needs and wants of the public.

The appendices articulate top-level findings from the New Zealand edition of Vote Compass. Appendix A contains findings from Vote Compass proper, which served as the campaign period survey. Appendix B includes results from the post-election study specifically related to political marketing. Appendix C contains results from omnibus items included in the Vote Compass application during the course of the campaign. In the next section, we discuss our interpretation of the core lessons learned from these data.

Responding to voters views: a marketing analysis of results and party policies

Literature in several fields of political science points to the importance of responsive, but also credible, policies in obtaining voter support. Political marketing literature argues that to win public support, political parties need to respond to voter concerns by creating policies that meet their constituents' needs and wants.⁵ Similarly, the spatial modelling literature builds on the assumption that, apart for those seeking votes to the right or left, most political parties compete for the support of the median voter by offering policies that appeal to the average person.⁶ However, theories of valence politics also make the point that political parties have to provide an image of competence and have a record of political achievement that can underpin confidence in their ability to govern.⁷ Recent political marketing research also shows that policy promises need to seem deliverable, not just desirable,⁸ and that parties must present an overall leadership and brand that is seen as both likeable and credible.⁹

Whilst the 2014 election yielded a strong victory for the National Party under John Key's guidance and a significant loss for the opposition Labour Party under the leadership of David Cunliffe, inspection of Vote Compass data provide a nuanced view of the election. Indeed, when Vote Compass data are linked to knowledge of party policies and issue positions are broken down by vote choice, we find that the two main parties differed in terms of their responsiveness to policy needs and on the presentation of a likeable and credible leadership brand. These findings are further supported by results of political marketing-related questions from the PES.

⁴ Because not all socio-demographic questions are fully completed by respondents, we imputed these missing data using the R package Amelia. The data were then weighted by census data using gender, age, education, religion, industry of work, and Maori ethnicity.

⁵ Bruce I. Newman, *The Marketing of the President: Political Marketing as Campaign Strategy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 1994) and J Lees-Marshment, 'The Marriage of Politics and Marketing' *Political Studies*, 49(4) (2001) pp 692-713.

⁶ The classic source is, of course, Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York, Harper and Row, 1957.

⁷ Donald Stokes, 'Spatial Models of Party Competition', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 57 (1963) pp 368-77. This approach has been applied most consistently to studies of the last three British elections: for example, see Harold Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne Stewart, and Paul Whitely, *Performance Politics and the British Voter* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁸ Anna Esselment, 'Delivering in government and getting results in minorities and coalitions'. In J Lees-Marshment (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Political Marketing*. (London and New York: Routledge 2012) pp 303-15 and Jennifer Lees-Marshment, *The Political Marketing Game* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) Chapter 6 on Managing Delivery.

⁹ Catherine Needham, 'Brand leaders: Clinton, Blair and the limitations of the permanent campaign' *Political Studies*, 53(2) (2005) pp 343-61; Kenneth M. Cosgrove, 'Political Branding in the Modern Age - Effective Strategies, Tools & Techniques,' Chapter 9 in the *Routledge Handbook of Political Marketing* edited by J Lees-Marshment (London and New York: Routledge 2012)

Policy that is responsive to voter concerns (needs and wants): desire for success, but also for everyone to get a chance to succeed, without hurting the environment

Vote Compass data showed some support for National policies in line with the election result. Specifically, New Zealanders wanted economic success. The economy was rated as the top issue. Likewise, the majority (i.e., 55%) expressed support for national standards in schools. 46% thought that welfare recipients should receive about the same government assistance as now. Thus, the position taken by National on these specific issues tended to resonate well with the majority of New Zealanders. Data from the PES also indicates that National were seen as more responsive to New Zealanders' wants and needs than Labour or the Greens, with National scoring positively on needs and wants, whilst Labour and the Greens scored negatively (see Figure 14).

Despite National's success at capturing voters' concerns on these key issues, data from Vote Compass also suggested that many of Labour's policies resonated with the majority of New Zealanders. Indeed, inequality was listed as the second biggest issue of the election, and action was wanted on lower incomes (whether through policy changes in taxing, housing, or the minimum wage). Furthermore, whilst the PES data places National in a position ahead of Labour or the Greens, that position is not strong. Indeed, National ranked just slightly above the mid-point on questions assessing their responsiveness to both the needs and wants of the public. In other words, despite the weaknesses identified in Cunliffe and/or the Labour brand, there were significant undercurrents of dissatisfaction with National amongst New Zealand voters.

In terms of specific numbers, 69% of respondents wanted the government to do more to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor. This view was not confined to those who were of low socioeconomic status; 60% of those earning more than \$100,000 a year agreed that more ought to be done to reduce inequality. Moreover, 66% of respondents were in support of an increase in the minimum wage. Once again, the majority (i.e., 58%) of those earning more than \$100k a year thought that minimum wage should be increased. Other data reveal the same trend: 56% of respondents thought that wealthier people should pay more in taxes, whereas 59% indicated that corporations should pay more tax. A near majority of the sample (i.e., 48%) thought that landlords should pay more tax on the sale of their rental properties. Data on housing indicated a similar trend: a clear majority (67%) of respondents thought that the government should build somewhat or much more affordable housing for Kiwis to buy, whilst there was little support for reducing government-provided state housing with 12% arguing for somewhat or much less, 39% about the same as now and 47% somewhat or much more. Data on tertiary education also suggested that National was out-of-step with public sentiment. Specifically, 55% of respondents agreed that the government should restore free university education, whereas less than a third of the sample (i.e., 30%) supported National's opposition to free tertiary education. Perhaps surprisingly, analysis of the partisanship of respondents also found that these preferences about action on inequality were not confined to opposition supporters – 46% of National voters wanted the government to do more to reduce the gap between rich and poor. And close to half (i.e., 46%) of National supporters said the minimum wage should be somewhat or much more than the current level. In short, the public's attitudes towards inequality are a potential weak spot for National, as roughly half of their supporters take issue positions on certain policies that are at odds with the official party line.

Other questions also indicated strong concern for the environment. Nearly half (i.e., 48%) of respondents wanted the Department of Conservation to receive somewhat or much more funding, and there was little difference in opinions by income. In other words, environmental concerns cut across all demographic cleavages of society. Furthermore, 47% agreed the government should not engage in further fracking; only 23% disagreed.

Overall, Vote Compass data suggested that there was a strong sense amongst New Zealanders that some people are being left behind; that not everybody is strong and fit and able to win the race as much as one might like to think; and that attention must be paid to the environment in which we live. Thus, as James commented, 'the 2014 election came in the middle of a decade of tectonic change'. But given that there was no clear sense amongst the general public of this change during the actual

campaign, more microscopic analyses are needed. Fortunately, Vote Compass data provide such micro-level data to give a more accurate understanding of what was going on during the 2014 election. Voters did not necessarily support the specific policies offered by parties such as Labour and the Greens. Indeed, opinions are more indicative of support for small movements rather than big ones. As such, a judgement needs to be made about what future policy measures voters would support. Whilst 46% agreed the minimum wage should be somewhat more, only 20% thought it should be much more. As such, the specific amount of that the minimum wage should increase needs to be worked out carefully to reflect this measured support for an increase. Indeed, these trends suggest that voters are pragmatic about what can and should be achieved. The challenge for the new government (and the Opposition parties) is to identify ways of responding to voters' concerns while maintaining the perception of credible leadership.

A leadership brand that is likeable and credible

Vote Compass data on voters' perceptions of the party leaders was striking. When asked how positive they felt about the following party leaders, respondents rated Key most highly at 5.5, whereas David Cunliffe was not only lower than Key, he was tied with or lower than that of 3 other minor party leaders – Winston Peters, Metiria Turei and Russel Norman (see Figure 13). A question of the day posed by Vote Compass following the first televised leader's debate showed a similar divide with 58% of respondents believing that Key won the debate, whereas only 32% believed that Cunliffe was the winner (Figure 16). TVNZ's own online/text poll on the night of the debate had the same overall result (i.e., 61% felt that Key won, whereas 39% felt that Cunliffe won). The PES data also follows this trend. Cunliffe performed lower than Key on questions which asked respondents to what degree party leaders conveyed a positive vision, a clear vision, were in touch with ordinary's people's concerns and capable of delivering their promises. Cunliffe also received lower evaluations than the minor party Green leaders on all these questions. Furthermore, all of Key's evaluations were positive whereas only one of Cunliffe's (conveying a positive vision) was (nearly) positive (see Figure 14).

Perceptions of Cunliffe were also low when focusing on groups who traditionally support the Labour Party. Indeed, more respondents thought that Key, rather than Cunliffe, won the debate (49% vs 39%, respectively) among those who earn less than \$60,000 a year - a group who, in the past, have been the Labour Party's base constituents. Given that Cunliffe spoke with great passion about issues such as housing, wages and living standards during the debate, it is even more surprising that people in this section of society did not favour him more than Key. Furthermore, the item in question asked the public to give their views in terms of what they had heard or read about the debate, not just if they had seen it. Despite the fact that the majority of media reports suggested that Cunliffe won, respondents still placed Key ahead. These findings demonstrate the strength of Key's leadership brand within the general public.¹⁰ Such results are in line with the political marketing literature which argues that a leader's brand must be credible and aspirational, and furthermore, that it takes time to build up a positive brand image.¹¹ Given he had only been party leader for a year, Cunliffe did not have the time needed to build strong relationships with key target voters. Left without a viable alternative, voters in the 2014 General Election stuck with the trusted brand (i.e., the National Party under the stewardship of Key) despite the noted discrepancies between National policies on inequality and the wants of voters.

A range of other measurements of Key and Cunliffe's leadership indicated the same patterns. For example, a *New Zealand Herald* poll of 112 CEOs rated Key above Cunliffe on several aspects including economic management, leadership, trustworthiness, courage, vision and strategy and political management¹². Similarly, a Herald-Digipoll asked voters who they thought would be the

¹⁰ However, it should be noted that respondent self-selection in both of these polls made the results possibly susceptible to party-driven manipulation.

¹¹ Gareth Smith, The 2001 General Election: Factors Influencing the Brand Image of Political Parties and Their Leaders. *Journal of Marketing Management*, vol. 17(9/10) (2001) pp 989-1006.

¹² http://m.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=11322051, 11 September 2014

better card player. Once again, respondents overwhelmingly chose Key over Cunliffe (26% vs 3%).¹³ Another telephone poll conducted between August 9 and August 13 2014 (n = 1007) examined indirect perceptions of both leaders by asking respondents who they would be more likely to want to housesit for them, be stuck on a desert island or have a beer with .¹⁴ Consistent with the previous polls and Vote Compass data, respondents overwhelming chose Key.

There were other issues that emerged in the campaign including ‘dirty politics’,¹⁵ related accusations around Minister Judith Collins and her resignation, and that the government’s spy agency, the GCSB, was conducting mass surveillance on New Zealanders. But these apparently had little effect on public opinion. For example, a question of the day on Dirty Politics reported that 71% of respondents thought that it would have little or no impact on their voting decision (see Figure 15).

However, not all the data are good news for Key and the National Party. Indeed, though Key scored better than his opponents, his individual score on the PES indicated a weakness. On a scale where -5 is not at all in touch and 5 was very in touch, Key only scored 0.3. The other leaders had negative scores below the midpoint, so he was the only leader evaluated positively, but 0.3 is still low for a leader normally seen as voter-friendly and likeable. Indeed, such results suggest he was beginning to lose touch with ordinary people. His strengths were clarity and delivery – he conveyed a more positive and clear vision for New Zealand that was seen as deliverable. Again, this links back to the importance of the economy, and delivery.

Policy that is deliverable not just desirable

Although Vote Compass data demonstrated more support for Labour-leaning policies than National, these results clearly indicate that voters must believe the policies are achievable before voting for them. The post-election survey tested perceptions of delivery by asking respondents how capable they thought the National, Labour and Green party leaders were of delivering on their promises. Out of the 6 political-marketing PES questions, this was Cunliffe’s biggest weakness. Cunliffe’s score was negative, whereas Key scored a +1.5. This further shows that, whilst voters may have liked Labour’s proposals, they did not think the party could deliver them. We should note, however, that respondents may have been assessing Cunliffe and Labour as less capable of delivery in the context of Labour’s low polling and the poor election result.

Given that the economy was rated as the most important issue during the election, coupled with the fact that the economy was doing well at the time, it is likely that voters attributed the strength of the economy to the incumbent party (i.e., National). Accordingly, voters may have been cautious about supporting the Labour-leaning policies on inequality out of fear that such proposals would damage economic progress. Relatedly, an Ipsos word cloud from Fairfax media indicated that words associated with Labour included disorganised, confused, struggling, useless and weak, and abysmal, whilst the top ones for National included positive words such as good, okay, competent, stable, and steady, as well as a single negative word (i.e., arrogant).¹⁶ These findings are in accord with theories of valence politics: people vote for politicians who are able to achieve goals that are widely shared, such as a stable and growing economy. They also reflect the revolving door of Labour leadership over the period since the previous election: from Phil Goff, to David Shearer, and then to David Cunliffe who took the position just one year before the election. Labour was caught in a vicious circle: its low level of support added to its internal difficulties, which generated an image of the party as incapable of governing and offset any occasional impressions to the contrary.

¹³ http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11316459, 30 August 2014

¹⁴ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/polls/10396696/Still-to-be-seen-if-Brand-Key-tarnished> 19 August 2014

¹⁵ Hager, Nicky, (2014). *Dirty Politics*. Nelson, Craig Potten Press.

¹⁶ <http://www.interactives.co.nz/2014/Aug/wordcloud/http://www.interactives.co.nz/>

Conclusion: New Zealand Political Science contributing to democracy

Vote Compass is an online voter engagement tool that played a substantial role in promoting public considerations of policy issues during the 2014 General Election. Vote Compass New Zealand also provided insight into public opinion by assessing respondents' views on 30 different policy questions and ultimately offers important lessons for both academics and practitioners. The main and post-election survey data indicated that, whilst National-type policies were supported in areas such as the economy and national standards in education, many of Labour's policies were generally more popular with voters. Indeed, the public expressed strong support for policies aimed at helping those on low incomes. Nevertheless, in terms of leadership capabilities, National's leader John Key was perceived as offering a more positive, clearer and deliverable brand relative to Labour's leader, David Cunliffe. This echoes the importance of not just proposing appealing policies, but also having a strong leadership brand. In other words, voters consider the whole package on offer. It is simply not good enough to have policies that are desirable: the policies must also be seen as deliverable.

The data from Vote Compass contain valuable lessons for practitioners. Specifically, these findings indicate that Labour face the challenge of creating a brand of competence to ensure that their policies are seen as deliverable. Despite winning a third consecutive term, National need to avoid becoming complacent. Whilst the public may consider the incumbent party's past behaviour when deciding who to vote for,¹⁷ elections only provide a simplistic assessment of many different issues and attributes. They do not offer a detailed critique of past performance. The advantage of Vote Compass data is that it offers a detailed guide into potential areas of weaknesses – as well as successes – linked closely to specific party platforms. Such fine-grained analyses can offer insight into areas where specific policies are out of line with public sentiment. As such, National would do well to take lessons from Vote Compass. As TVNZ's wrap up story on election night noted, the 2014-2017 government needs to find a way to address the underlying concern expressed by ordinary New Zealanders that not everybody is doing as well as they could. If government is unable to meet this challenge, they risk being seen as unresponsive to the public over the next three years.

Two days after winning the 2014 General Election, the newly re-elected Prime Minister John Key spoke repeatedly about both the need for his party to avoid complacency and arrogance, and the need to address a concern about those who are less well-off: 'there is a legitimate concern from New Zealanders right across the income spectrum about helping people.'¹⁸ This same sentiment was clear from Vote Compass data. If parties do pay attention to the voice of New Zealanders, the democratic contribution of Vote Compass will be profound. Of course, other polling and survey data based on random probability samples, such as that from the 2014 New Zealand Election Study (NZES), is likely to deliver the same messages, without the degree of caution required given the self-selected nature of Vote Compass. But the publicity given to the Vote Compass findings during the campaign as a result of its partnership with One News/TVNZ brought the findings to a much wider audience, possibly making politicians more conscious of the need to react to them.

Aside from such speculation, one can be more certain in concluding that Vote Compass achieved its goal of educating and engaging voters about policy during a time in which elections often focus on personality rather than policy. Indeed, over 330,000 people used the tool during the campaign, making the New Zealand edition the highest per capita response of any country's Vote Compass application to date. In terms of community impact, during the NZPSA annual conference panel on Vote Compass, academics talked about using the tool in their first year lectures and reported that teachers had used it in schools to promote a discussion of the election. Moreover, analyses done by the Electoral

¹⁷ Morris Fiorina *Retrospective Voting in American Elections* (Yale University Press 1981)

¹⁸ Campbell Live, Monday 22 September evening (<http://www.tv3.co.nz/CAMPBELL-LIVE-Monday-September-22-2014/tabid/3692/articleID/103019/MCat/2908/Default.aspx>). Similar comments were made on Breakfast TV that morning (<http://tvnz.co.nz/breakfast-news/john-key-committed-deliver-strong-result-nz-video-6087759>); as well as when talking to the media on election night and at press conferences on Sunday 21 September (<http://www.3news.co.nz/politics/national-party-wins-third-term-2014092023>; http://m.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11328998).

Commission found that 13,600 people went directly from Vote Compass to the elections website, making it the second biggest referrer of traffic (after Facebook). When the Commission posted a link to Vote Compass on their Facebook page, it got the third biggest reach of all their unpaid posts (just behind posts regarding social media rules and an announcement of the election results). Voting turnout rose in 2014, although still remained low compared to all previous elections since universal suffrage. Yet the Electoral Commission's post-election survey indicated that the number of non-voters who indicated that they "couldn't work out who to vote for" was their primary reason for not voting dropped from 11% in 2011 to 5% in 2014.¹⁹ While it is impossible to be sure if this was an effect of Vote Compass, there are good reasons to think that it was. In short, Vote Compass allowed New Zealanders to engage with policy. The subsequent results that were reported during the campaign via TVNZ means that the public's voice was heard to a much greater extent in the 2014 election than in previous elections. It is also a good example of how academic expertise can have a positive impact on society, as Vote Compass enabled engagement between academia, the media and the public.

¹⁹ Sourced from presentation at the NZPSA 2014 annual conference and subsequent email from Anastasia Turnbull, Electoral Commission.

Appendix A: Vote Compass New Zealand 2014 campaign period survey results

Figure 1: Distribution of wealth

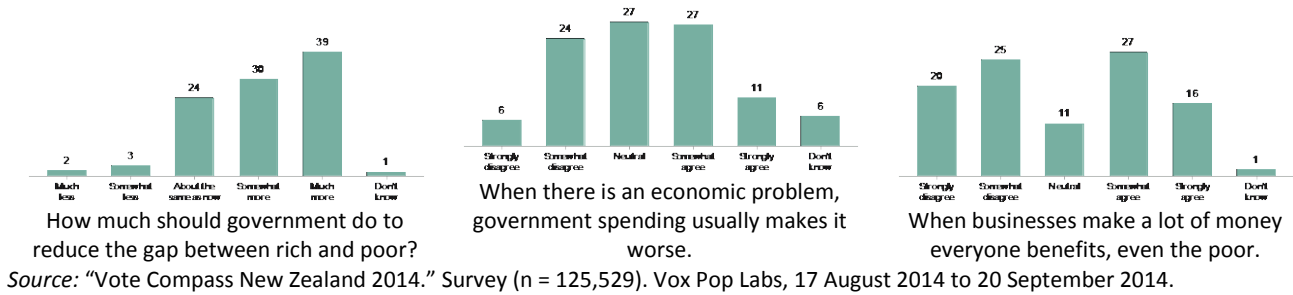


Figure 2: Employment

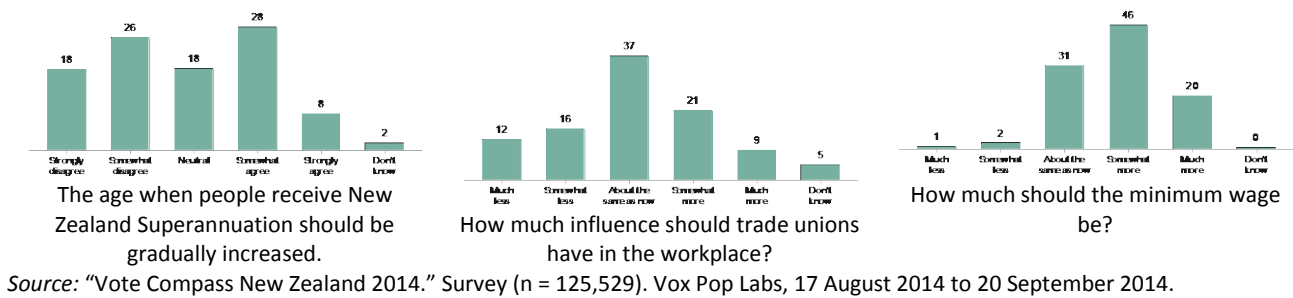


Figure 3: Environment and natural disasters

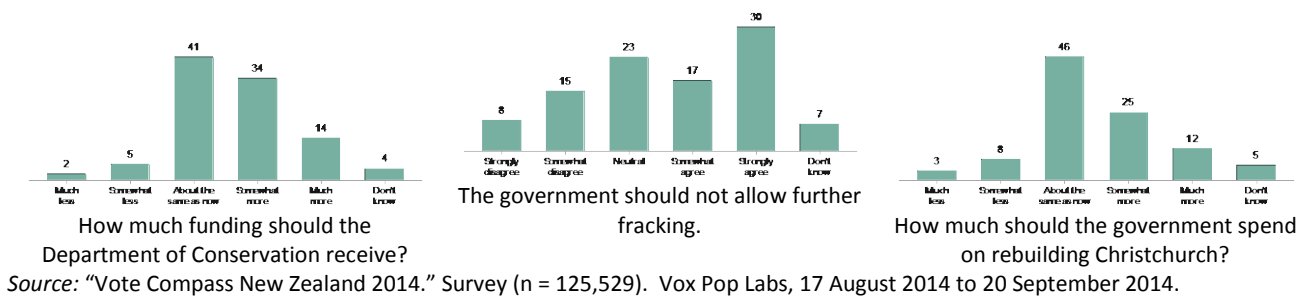


Figure 4: Law and order

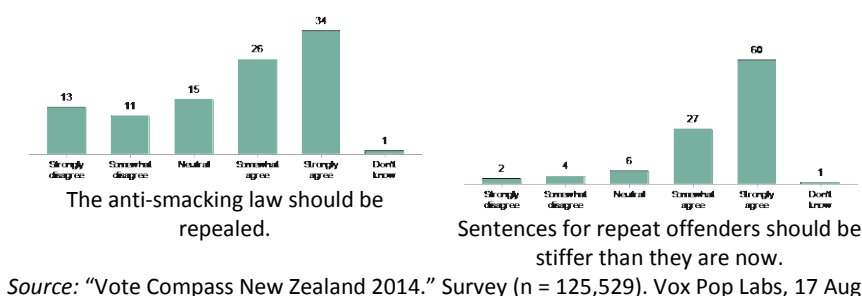


Figure 5: Social programs

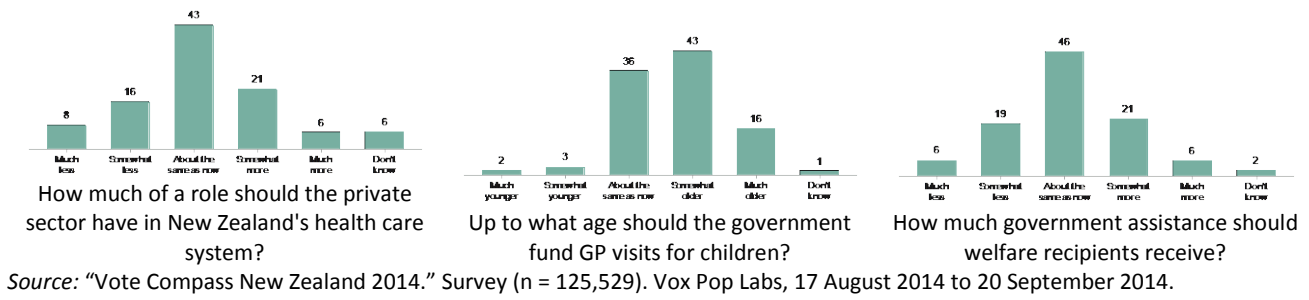


Figure 6: Housing

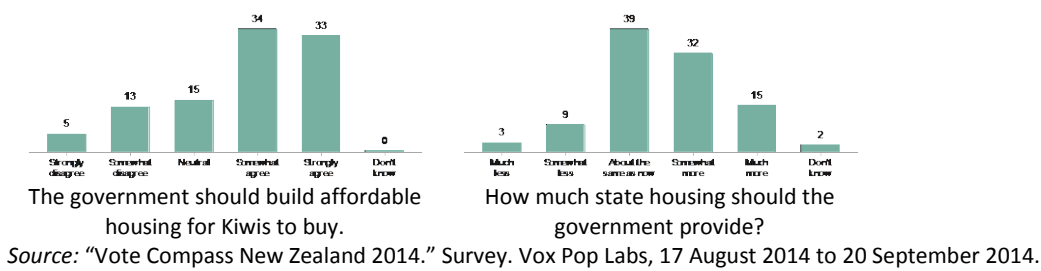


Figure 7: Taxes

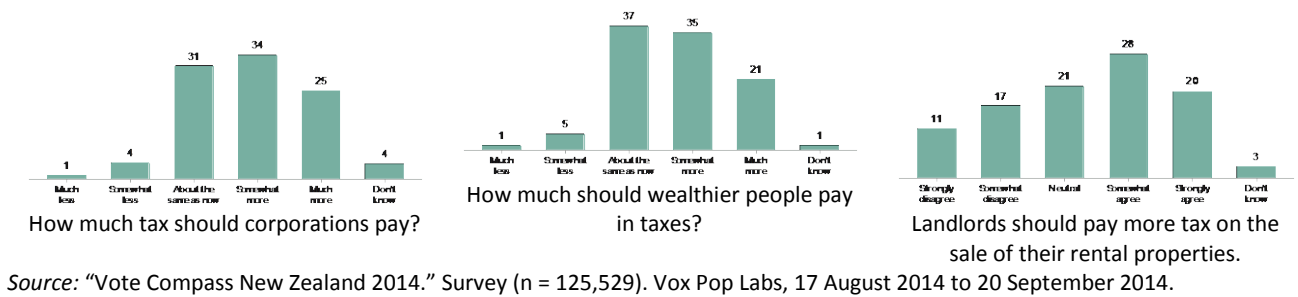


Figure 8: Immigration and foreign ownership

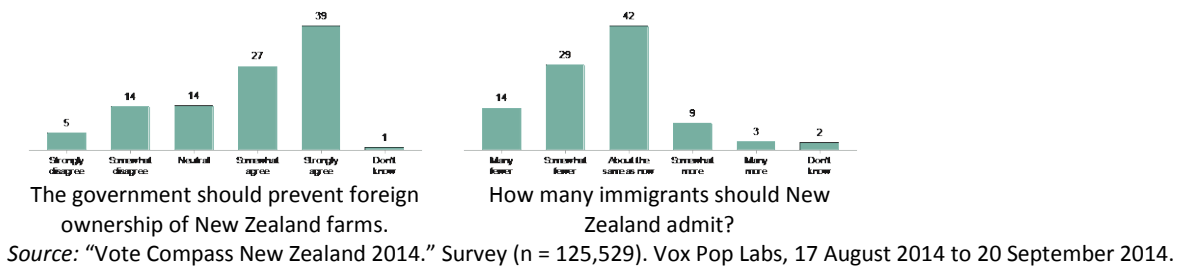


Figure 9: Māori affairs

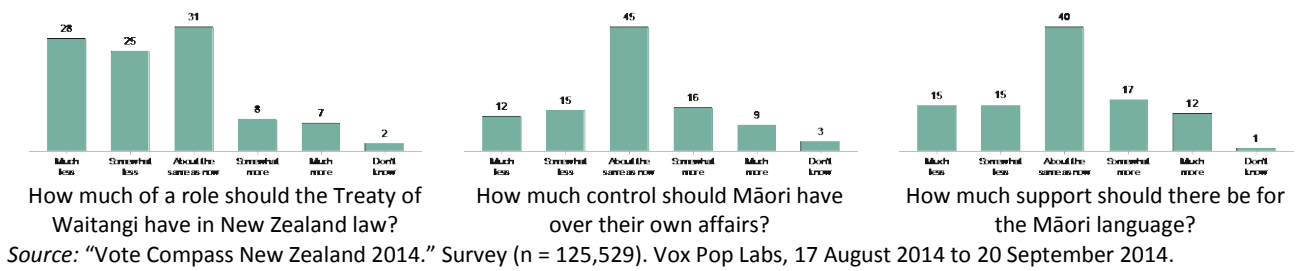


Figure 10: Education

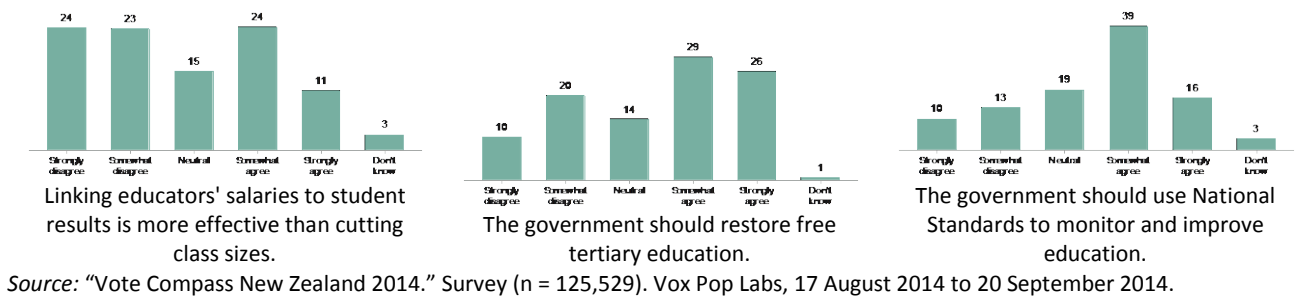


Figure 11: Moral issues

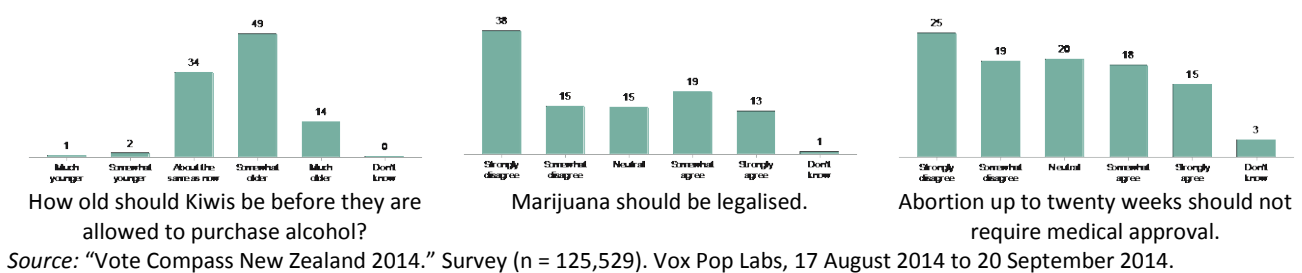
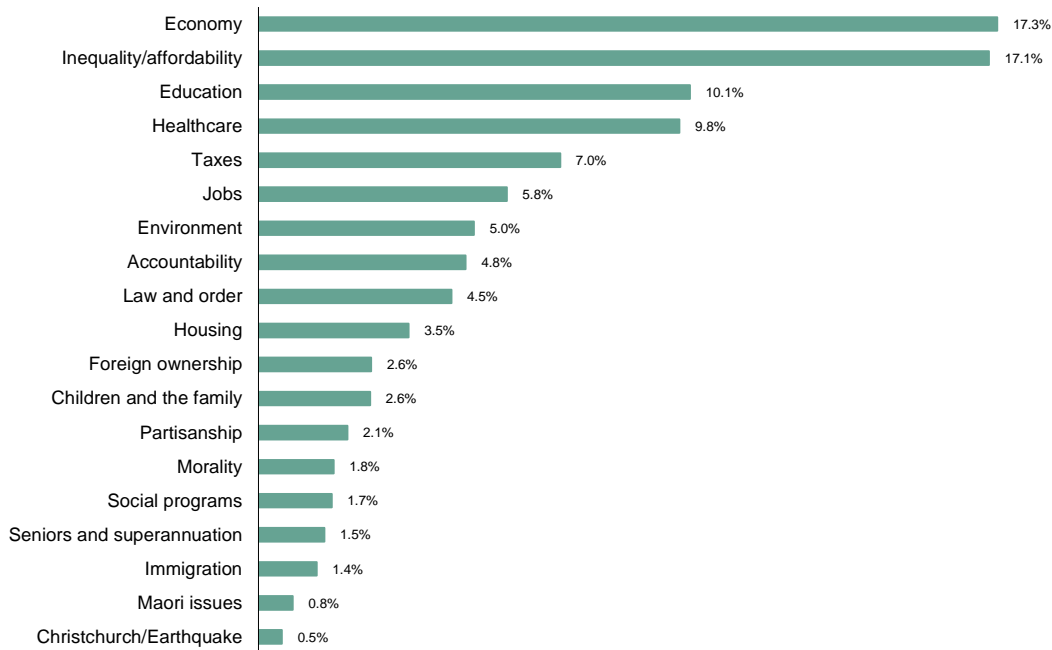


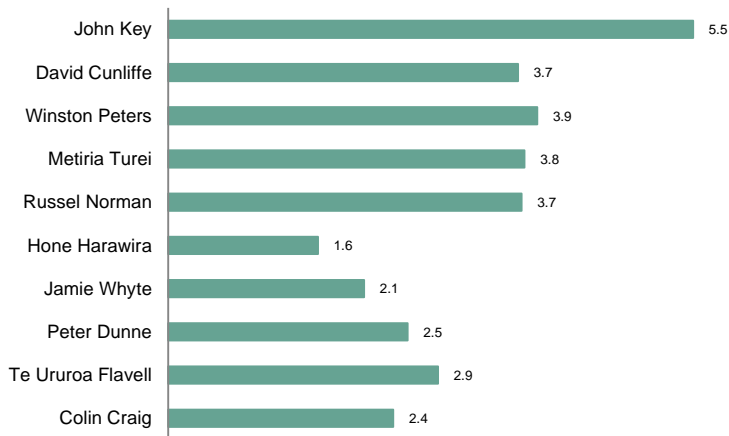
Figure 12: Issue importance



What issue is most important to you in this election?

Source: "Vote Compass New Zealand 2014." Survey (n = 125,529). Vox Pop Labs, 17 August 2014 to 20 September 2014.

Figure 13: Leader evaluations

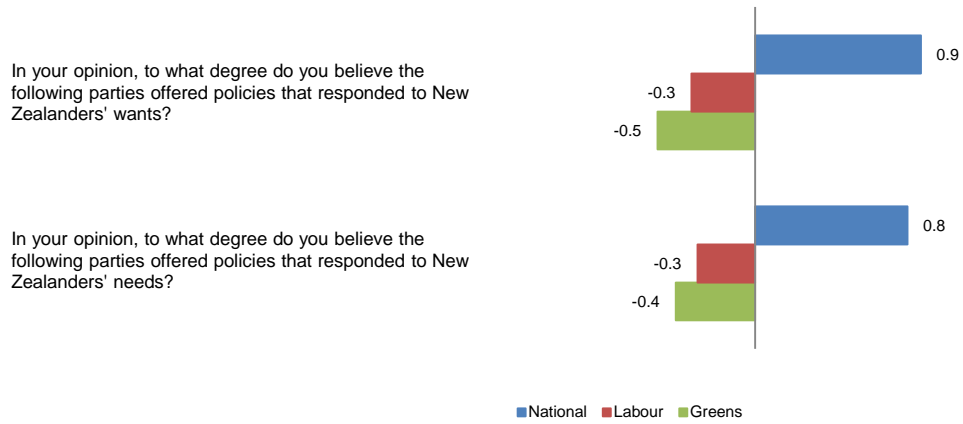
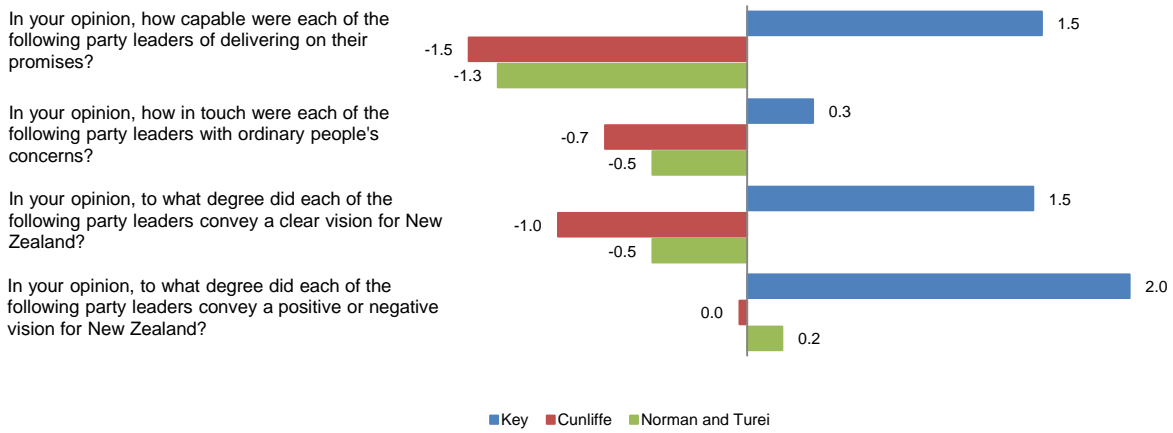


[On a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means really dislike and 10 means really like] How do you feel about the following party leaders?

Source: "Vote Compass New Zealand 2014." Survey (n = 125,529). Vox Pop Labs, 17 August 2014 to 20 September 2014.

Appendix B: Post-Election survey

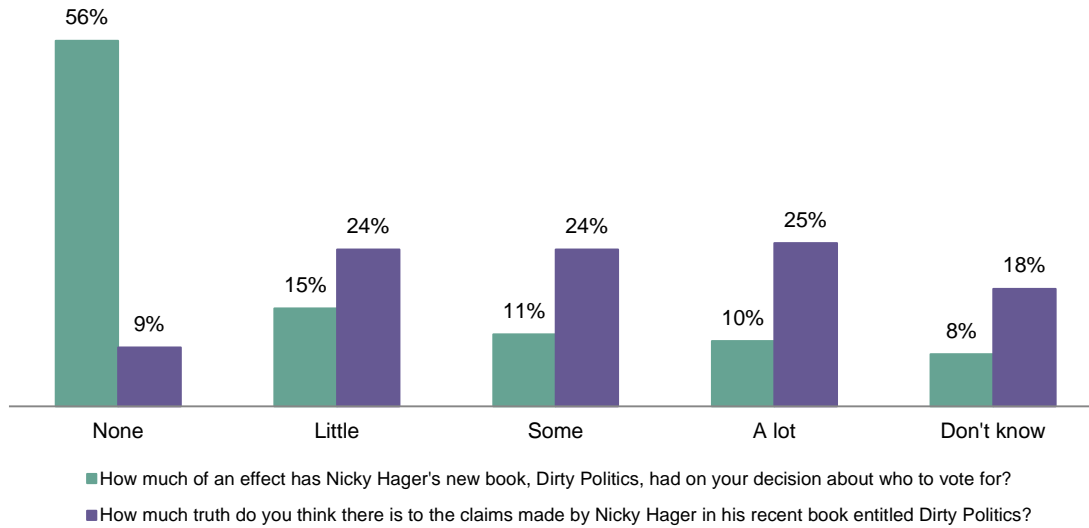
Figure 14: Vote Compass New Zealand 2014 post-election survey results



Source: "Vote Compass New Zealand 2014 post-election study." Survey (n = 14,167). Vox Pop Labs, 24 September 2014 to 17 October 2014.

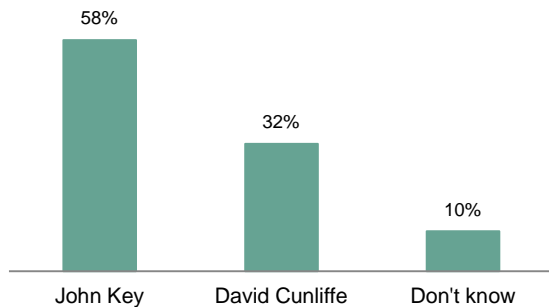
Appendix C: Vote Compass New Zealand 2014 omnibus items

Figure 15: Perspectives on Nicky Hager's *Dirty Politics*



Source: "Vote Compass New Zealand 2014." Survey (n = 13,913). Vox Pop Labs, 21 August 2014 to 25 August 2014.

Figure 16: Debate results

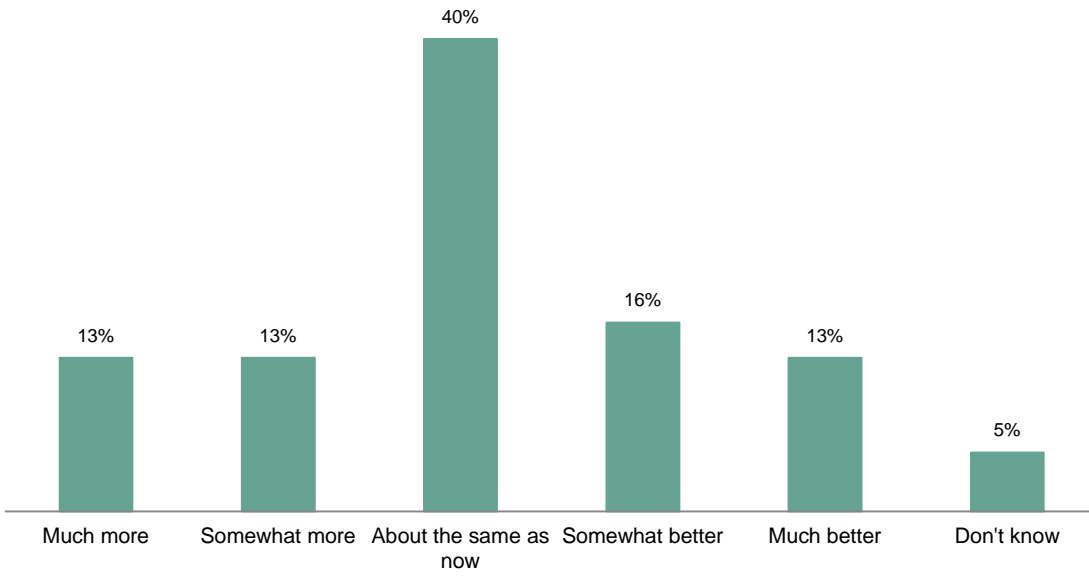


From what you saw, heard or read about the debate, who do you think won?

Source: "Vote Compass New Zealand 2014." Survey (n = 2,464). Vox Pop Labs, 28 August 2014.

Note: Only those respondents who indicated that they watched the debate are included in this analysis.

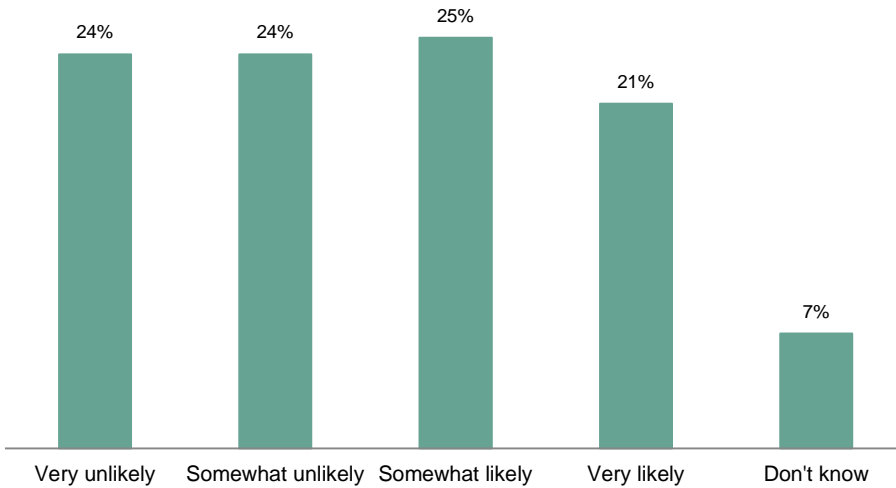
Figure 17: Perceptions of Judith Collins' resignation



What is your perception of Team Key and the National Party following the resignation of Judith Collins?

Source: "Vote Compass New Zealand 2014." Survey (n = 5,001). Vox Pop Labs, 30 August 2014 to 1 September 2014.

Figure 18: Perceptions of mass surveillance by the GCSB



How likely do you think it is that the government's spy agency (GCSB) is conducting mass surveillance?

Source: "Vote Compass New Zealand 2014." Survey (n = 5,100). Vox Pop Labs, 17 August 2014 to 18 August 2014.