Consistency and Change in Political Party Support Across Three Consecutive New Zealand Elections: Who Switched and Who Stayed Loyal?

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In this study we decomposed New Zealanders' support for the National and Labour parties from 2011 – 2020 by examining the within-person trajectories of change in party support over (and annually within) three consecutive election cycles. To do so, we applied latent class growth curve modelling to nine waves of the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study, a large annual probability survey of New Zealand adults (N = 5,213). We identified a Core National class (50.5%), who tended to consistently support National but oppose Labour, and a Core Labour class (39.1%), who consistently supported Labour but opposed National. The Switcher class (10.4%), who initially preferred National over Labour, depolarized during each election cycle before reversing support for the parties completely from 2017 – 2020. Switchers had unique characteristics compared to the core supporter classes, including higher levels of openness to experience. These findings add to understandings of how party support changes and for whom.

Keywords: *Electoral volatility, New Zealand; Partisanship; Polarization; Elections*

Introduction

Partisanship and polarization are enduring topics in political research. Notably, these concepts emphasise stable and persistent party attachments paired with growing opposition to political out-parties (Iyengar et al. 2012). Yet, as much as this research views voters as clearly divided and committed partisans, political power continues to shift between major competing parties across political systems—a fickle oscillation that belies the stability of partisanship. In New Zealand, the competing center-right and center-left National and Labour parties have enjoyed extended periods of popularity and governance. The National party, aided by the popularity of leader John Key, successfully contested three general elections from 2008 – 2014. Yet, the Labour party picked up support under leader Jacinda Ardern, winning the 2017 election, followed by an historic 2020 election win. During each of these periods of governance, one party's success came at the other's expense, with Labour support crumbling under Key's National government, and National party support collapsing in turn under Ardern's Labour government, particularly in the Covid-19 environment.

Although these broad trends can be observed through the performance of each party by way of vote share at national elections (see Figure 1), they may mask specific trajectories of change over time among different subgroups of New Zealanders. For example, whereas aggregate voting data suggest New Zealanders have increased their support for Labour in recent years, there may be subgroups of New Zealanders who have remained committed National party supporters, swayed across party lines, or even groups who may be increasingly polarized in their views of the two major parties.

This study takes a novel approach to examining change in attitudes toward political parties in New Zealand by identifying and elucidating different latent groups of people according to their within-person trajectories of change in support for the National and Labour parties between 2011 – 2020. We model these rates of change using data from the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study, a large-scale annually based national probability panel study of registered voters in New Zealand. After establishing the key latent classes that characterise the different rates of change in party support,

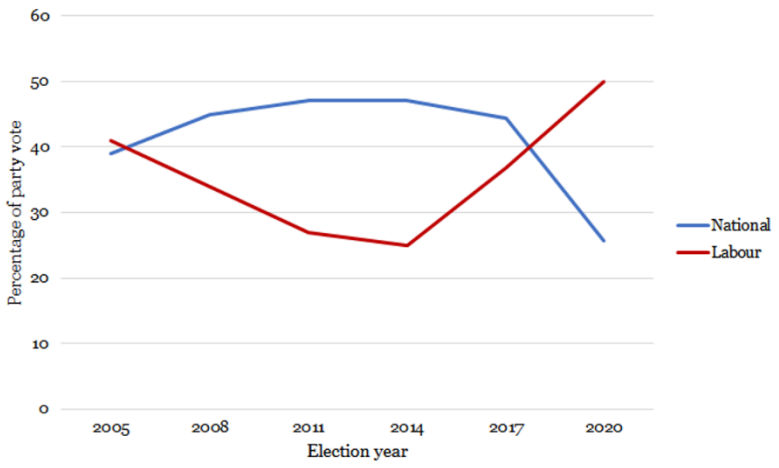

Figure 1. Percentage of total party vote gained by the National and Labour parties across recent national elections in New Zealand. Data obtained from https://www.electionresults.govt.nz/.

we validate the classes by comparing their party vote proportions in the 2014, 2017, and 2020 elections. We then examine the demographic, personality, and political attitudes that predict membership within each of these distinct classes.

Trends in party support over time

While public opinion has shifted between the National and Labour parties over time, some New Zealanders likely maintained steady commitment to one party, but opposition to the other. These groups would represent the core partisans who stick with their respective party through its ups and downs. Indeed, partisanship is highly stable in the US (e.g., Green & Palmquist, 1994) and research suggests that, when measured as the percentage of people who feel close to a given party, partisanship is roughly as common in New Zealand (i.e., around 56%; Dalton & Weldon, 2007). Consistent with these findings, Satherley et al. (2021) identified high levels of test-retest stability in New Zealanders' support for the main political parties between 2012 – 2017, suggesting it is uncommon for attitudes toward the parties to drastically change over time. As such, we expect to identify two classes of New Zealanders whose support for the National and Labour parties remain relatively steady and polarized (with one class supporting National and opposing Labour, and the opposite for the other) over time, although it is unclear just what percentage of the population these classes would encompass.

Whereas research on partisanship emphasises a stable commitment among voters to a given party, recent work in the US demonstrates that how party attitudes manifest changes over time. Specifically, researchers have identified increasing levels of affective polarization, whereby aggregate ratings of warmth toward in-parties and out-parties have grown increasingly apart over the past 40 years (Hetherington, 2001), particularly due to increasingly negative out-party ratings (Iyengar et al., 2012). Research on affective polarization has since proliferated, with many viewing it as indicative of, and closely related to, a hostile and extreme political climate in the US (Finkel et al., 2020). However, attention has also been drawn to whether similar trends are occurring globally. Gidron et al. (2020; see also Lauka et al., 2018) argue that affective polarization in the US is actually at a similar level or lower than in many other nations, including New Zealand, when comparing the average difference in thermometer ratings of competing parties. They thus note that polarization is not a uniquely US-based phenomenon in terms of absolute levels. Further, whereas some researchers have suggested New Zealand is one of the few countries where affective polarization is increasing (Boxell et al., 2019), Gidron et al. (2020) showed that affective polarization has actually been relatively stable in New Zealand between 1995 – 2015, with perhaps periods of increasing but then decreasing polarization.

Increased affective polarization among the public is commonly attributed to growing polarization among political elites (Gidron et al., 2020; Hetherington, 2001; Lupu, 2015). While it is unclear to what extent New Zealand political elites have polarized, research suggests New Zealanders view their political system as rather ideologically polarized (Dalton, 2008), and the National and Labour parties as further right and left of centre between 2008 – 2014 (Vowles et al., 2017). Although affective polarization has been hotly researched in the US, research in New Zealand is more limited. Affective polarization may be dependent on the specific periods examined, and researchers have yet to examine whether affective polarization may be unique to a sub-group of the population rather than a broader trend, both in New Zealand and globally.

Finally, in direct contrast to the potential sub-groups of voters highlighted by the partisanship and affective polarization literatures, there remains a subset of voters responsible for the shifts in vote share between parties over time. Despite their importance to electoral outcomes, these voters (e.g., fence sitters, swing, and floating voters) are generally poorly understood (Mayer, 2007). Research has seldom examined how people's attitudes toward major parties change over time, with emphasis on aggregate indices of partisan stability which are unable to account for voters who shift preference. Rather, researchers have examined behavioural patterns of vote change (volatility) over time between two or more elections (e.g., Dassonneville, 2016; Kuhn, 2012; van der Meer et al., 2016; Wurthmann et al., 2021). For example, Kuhn (2009) found that 25% of respondents to the Swiss Household-Panel between 1999 and 2007 changed their party vote across the political divide at least once. However, specific estimates of vote switching will depend on the context examined, and do not capture the nature of attitude change toward political parties over time (for example, vote switching may be strategic in multiparty systems, or capture only a very brief shift—patterns that require participants responding to multiple election cycles to identify).

Studies examining shifts in vote preference (or reported vote) over time have identified a number of factors associated with the propensity to shift. For example, dissatisfaction with party and economic performance predicts shifts away from the incumbent government (Dassonneville et al., 2016; Hui & Federico, 2021). These findings suggest a rational thought process behind switching votes, but others have questioned the political sophistication of switchers. Dassonneville (2012) found that political interest predicts increased volatility between elections, but decreased volatility within election campaigns, arguing that those who are more sophisticated make their decision to switch before election campaigns begin. Low levels of political efficacy also tend to be associated with vote switching, thought to be due to disaffection with a party (Dassonneville, 2012; Dejaeghere & Dassonneville, 2012).

Voter predispositions, specifically personality traits, have received more limited focus as precursors of vote switching, yet have been widely researched in relation to general political attitudes (Gerber et al., 2012). For example, one of the most robust findings in the personality-politics literature has been the negative association between openness to experience and conservative political orientation (see Osborne et al., 2021). Bakker et al. (2016) found that those higher in openness to experience were more likely to switch their vote over time in Denmark and the UK, alongside lower levels of extraversion in Denmark. This effect presumably

reflects the greater willingness of those higher in openness to experience to consider and evaluate a variety of political ideas and policies, rather than rigidly adapting one particular frame. Consistent with this interpretation, Gerber et al. (2012) showed that lower levels of openness to experience, but also higher levels of extraversion and agreeableness, was associated with stronger partisan identification. However, Erisen and Blais (2016) showed that openness to experience correlates positively with strategic voting, which raises questions over the extent to which vote shifts reflect changing attitudes toward the parties, or perhaps strategic concerns. Thus, early evidence suggests personality may predict how committed voters are to parties, but more research on the robustness of these effects is necessary.

Overview of the current study

Here, we apply novel models of attitude change over time to examine classes of New Zealand voters based on their trajectories of support for the National and Labour parties over three election cycles. Our models investigate the possibility that different groups of New Zealanders differ in the rate of change in their support over time (whether their support is constant, increasing, or decreasing). In this way, it aligns with, and allows for, the potential detection of multiple types voters identified in the literature (i.e., partisans, the affectively polarizing, and switchers) rather than focusing on aggregate trends (e.g., as in the affective polarization literature), or different groups independently. Our approach differs from past research by focusing on within-person trends in support for the parties over three election cycles, rather than focusing on vote changing between elections. In this way, the results speak specifically to change in support, and avoid capturing strategic voting or specific one-off changes in vote.

Our analysis covers three election cycles from 2011 – 2014, 2014 – 2017, and 2017 – 2020. The National party was in government and received a considerable share of the vote following the 2011 (47% vs. Labour's 27%) and 2014 (47% vs. Labour's 25%) election cycles. For the 2017 general election, leadership changes for both parties saw a small decrease in the National party vote share (44%) and a large increase in the Labour party vote share (37%) under new leader Jacinda Ardern. Although the Labour party was still able to form a government from 2017 due to support from New Zealand First, the Labour party, and particularly Ardern, gained support for her handling of numerous national issues across the cycle. This culminated with the party's Covid-19 response, which saw the Labour party vote share soar (50%) and the National party vote share plummet (26%) to a record result at the 2020 general election. Thus, the National party was generally favoured over the period examined, but aggregate levels of support shifted in favour of Labour from 2017.

Here, we expected to identify a class of National supporters and a class of Labour supporters that maintained consistent and high support for their party (but opposition toward the other party) over time, reflecting the committed partisans. We also expected to identify a class characterised by generally decreasing levels of support for the National party, and increasing support for the Labour party, accounting for the aggregate shifts in support for these two parties across the period. Given the increasing rates of polarization found overseas, we may also identify the presence of such classes (i.e., increasing levels of support for one party and opposition to the other).

Finally, we validate our identified classes by examining voting proportions for each class across elections, and compare demographic, personality, and political attitudes across classes. Although dependent on identifying the classes, we hypothesised that switchers would have higher levels of openness to experience than committed supporters. As partisanship is often thought to reflect a psychological attachment to a party (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960), we also hypothesised that those higher in political identity centrality (i.e., those who feel their political beliefs are important to their sense of self) would be less likely to change their party support over time. Analyses controlled for gender, age, and ethnicity, as well as political orientation, satisfaction with the (2011 National party) government (which, broadly, are expected to predict membership in the National and Labour supporter classes at either extreme, relative to a switcher class), and political efficacy.

METHODS

Procedure

This study used Waves 3 to 11 (2011 – 2020) of the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS), an annual longitudinal national probability of New Zealand adults sampled from the New Zealand electoral roll. The Time 3 NZAVS contained responses from 6,884 participants (3,918 retained from one or more previous wave, 2,966 new additions from booster sampling, and 4 unmatched participants or unsolicited opt-ins). The booster for the Time 3 NZAVS was non-random and recruited through a major New Zealand newspaper. Further booster sampling was conducted at Time 4 (2012), Time 5 (2013), Time 8 (2016), and Time 10 (2018) through the New Zealand electoral roll. The sample size by Time 11 (2019 – 2020) was 42,684. Specific details on the sampling procedure at each wave and retention across waves can be found in Sibley (2021).

Participants

The Time 3 (2011) NZAVS contained responses from 6,884 individuals, of which 63% were women, and with an average age of 51 (range 18 – 96; SD: 16). In terms of ethnicity, 75% were NZ European, 11% Māori, 4% Asian, and 3% Pacific. The Time 11 (2019 – 2020) contained 42,684 responses, of which 64% women, 93% were NZ European, 10% Māori, 4% Asian, and 3% Pacific (participants could report more than one ethnicity). To be included in the analysis, participants had to complete at least 8 of the 9 waves from Time 3 – Time 11, leaving an overall sample size of 5,213 (after also accounting for missing data on the dependent variables).

Measures

The indicator variables for the latent class piecewise growth-curve models were ratings of support for the National and Labour parties. Participants were asked to rate how strongly they opposed or supported each party on a scale from 1 (*Strongly oppose*) to 7 (*Strongly support*).

We also examined predictors of latent class membership, including personality and political attitudes. Big-Five personality was assessed with the 20-item mini IPIP (Sibley et al., 2011). Participants rated how accurately each statement described them on a scale from 1 (*Very inaccurate*) to 7 (*Very accurate*). Example items included "Am the life of the party" (Extraversion, α = .75), "Sympathise with others' feelings" (Agreeableness, α = .69), "Get chores done right away" (Conscientiousness, α = .65), "Have frequent mood swings" (Neuroticism, α = .72), and "Have a vivid imagination" (Openness to Experience, α = .70).

In terms of political attitudes, participants rated their political orientation on a scale from 1 (*Extremely liberal*) to 7 (*Extremely conservative*), and their satisfaction with "the performance of the current New Zealand government" on a scale from 0 (*Completely dissatisfied*) to 10 (*Completely satisfied*). Political identity centrality was measured with the item "how important are your political beliefs to how you see yourself?" on a scale from 1 (*Not important*) to 7 (*Very important*). Political efficacy was measured with the item "the average citizen can have an influence on government decisions" (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). With the exception of political identity centrality and political efficacy, all items were measured at the first wave (Time 3/2011) when the National party was in power. Political identity centrality and political efficacy were measured at Time 5, as this was the first wave at which they were included in the study.

Analytic strategy

To identify groups of New Zealanders based on their rates of change in support for the National and Labour parties, we conducted latent class piecewise growth-curve models (Bollen & Curran, 2006). Standard growth-curve models examine the average rate of change over time in a given outcome or outcomes, based on the growth over time within each individual observation in the sample. By estimating these growth-curves as latent classes, our models account for the possibility that there are different groups that are developing at different rates over time (e.g., a portion of the sample may be increasing in the outcome over time, whereas other groups may be decreasing or unchanged in the outcome measure over time). This approach allows us to detect whether a segment of the population is polarizing in their support over time, whereas another may be more partisan, and another still may switch party preferences. We estimated piecewise slopes whereby a different slope was estimated within each class for each of three consecutive election cycles (2012–2014, 2015–2017, and 2018–2020). This accounted for the possibility that the rate of change in support for each party could differ across election cycles, and, in particular, may be influenced by elections. Finally, within-class intercepts were free to vary while slope variances were fixed to zero. Thus, our approach assumes that, to the extent that there are individual differences in rates of change within each election cycle (i.e., the random effect of each slope), this variability is reflected in the *different latent classes*. Put another way, individuals within classes could vary in their absolute support for each party, but the classes themselves were defined centrally by the rate of change in support over time.

RESULTS

Model estimation and selection

We specified models with between 2 – 5 classes to account for various possible patterns of change in support over the period, with model fit statistics displayed in Table 1. Model entropy, which indicates better class separation at values closer to 1, was highest for the two-class solution, and notably lower for the four-class solution. Yet, decreases in AIC and BIC values indicated better model fit with each additional class. Comparing the two and three-class model solutions, which both attained similarly high entropy, the three-class solution produced a marginally higher minimum classification probability across the classes (0.82 – 0.94; see Table 2), than the two-class solution (.81 and .98), and inspection of the classes indicated the presence of an additional theoretically meaningful class. We opted for the three-class solution which parsimoniously summarized the patterns of change in New Zealanders' party support over the period.

Model results

Of the three estimated classes, the 'Core National Class' was the largest (n = 2,634; 50.5% of the sample) followed by the 'Core Labour Class' (n = 2,038; 39.1% of the sample), with the 'Switcher Class' (n = 541; 10.4%) comprising the lowest proportion of the sample. The trajectory of change over time in support for the National and Labour parties which defines the classes is displayed in Figure 2, with regression coefficients present in Table 3.

As shown in Figure 2, the Core National Class was defined by high levels of support for the National party compared to support for the Labour party, and support for these parties remained relatively stable over the 2012 – 2014 and 2015 – 2017 periods. However, the 2018 – 2020 period saw a decline in support for the National party and increase in support for the Labour party, although support for the National party remained noticeably higher. The opposite pattern was observed for the Core Labour Class, with support for the Labour party much higher than support for the National party. Support for both parties was again relatively stable from 2012 – 2017, but Labour party support increased, and National party support decreased, in the 2018 – 2020 period.

Finally, the Switcher Class exhibited the largest amount of change in support for the parties over time. This class was initially more supportive of the National party on average, but the difference in support for each party was less than that exhibited by the other classes. The

Table 1. Model fit indices for each model specified.

Number of classes	AIC	BIC	Entropy
2	250451.716	250714.073	.839
3	248109.274	248463.455	.825
4	246535.041	246961.370	.725
5	245706.524	246205.001	.799

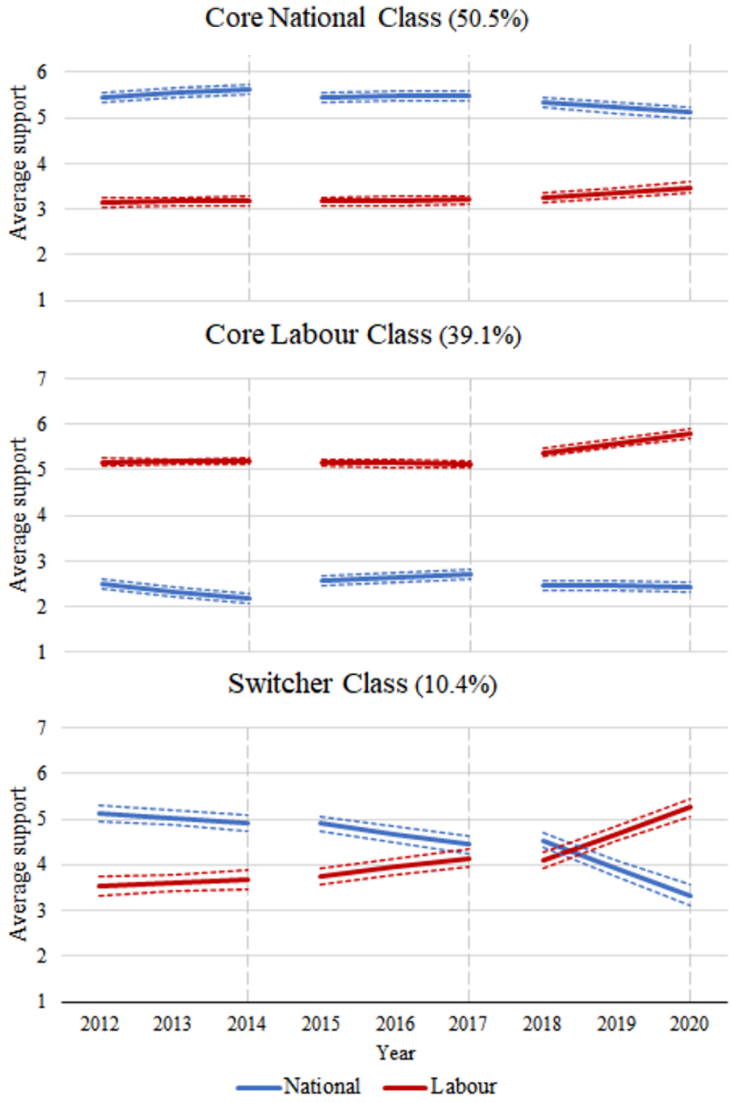

Figure 2. Piecewise trajectories of change in support for the National and Labour parties within each electoral cycle over the 2011 – 2020 period.

Switcher Class also showed a tendency to *de-polarize* in their levels of support across each election cycle, with support for the National party decreasing, and Labour party support increasing. This pattern was most drastic during the 2018 – 2020 period, where levels of support reversed such that the Labour party was preferred on average more than the National party, and the rate of change in support for each party was large.

The classes identified here are further characterized by unique voting behaviour during the 2014, 2017, and 2020 general elections. Although we focus on the National and Labour parties, New Zealand is a multiparty system and thus there are other viable parties (e.g., NZ First, Greens) that New Zealanders could vote for. The voting proportions shown in Table 3 show that a very high proportion of the Core National Class indicated that they voted for the National party at each election (i.e., .73 and above), yet essentially none voted for Labour across the elections. The Core Labour Class conversely were unlikely to vote for National and tended to be most likely to vote for Labour, particularly in the 2020 election. However, the proportion of the Core Labour Class who voted for Labour was generally lower than the proportion of the Core National Class who voted for National, likely due to the relatively poorer performance of the party over the period examined. Indeed, Core Labour supporters were more likely to intend to vote for some party other than Labour (.38) or National (.00) during the 2017 election (i.e., .42). The Switchers Class exhibited changes in voting intentions over time that mirrored the observed changes in their support for the major parties over time. Specifically, they were most likely to vote for National in 2014 (.38), but were more likely to vote for some other party in 2017 (.32), likely indicating a general dissatisfaction with the National party. By 2020, Switchers were highly likely to vote for the Labour party (.67). Finally, even though Core National supporters decreased in National party support and increased in Labour party support in 2020, they still steadfastly resisted voting for Labour (.002 in 2020).

On the whole, these classes capture the actual patterns of change in support exhibited toward the main political parties in the New Zealand electoral system from 2011 – 2020. Crucially, however, our analyses suggest that there is no evidence of a group of New Zealanders who may be consistently polarizing in their support for the parties over time (see also Satherley et al., 2020 for aggregate trends over the same period). Moreover, our analyses identify a group of New Zealanders, and the size of that group, who seem most susceptible, or likely, to shift their support for the parties over time.

Class characteristics

To further examine the unique characteristics of the three latent classes identified, we conducted a logistic regression of the demographics, personality, and political attitudes predicting class membership using Mplus' R3Step approach. The results of this analysis, which examines predictors of membership in the Core National and Core Labour classes relative to the Switchers Class are displayed in Table 4.

Of particular interest here is comparing the Core National Class, who generally maintained high support and preference for the National Party, to the Switchers Class, who initially preferred the National Party but converted their support toward the Labour Party as time went on. Indeed, Switchers tended to be younger than Core National supporters and were higher in both

Table 2. Regression coefficients for the piecewise growth curves estimated for each latent class.

	Core National class			Core Labour class			Switcher class		
National support	b	se	p	b	se	p	b	se	p
Intercept	5.444	0.052	< .001	2.498	0.055	< .001	5.133	0.087	< .001
2012-2014 slope	0.098	0.012	< .001	-0.164	0.017	< .001	-0.105	0.041	.011
2015-2017 slope	0.015	0.007	.035	0.070	0.009	< .001	-0.232	0.032	< .001
2018-2020 slope	-0.110	0.012	< .001	-0.019	0.010	.061	-0.599	0.036	< .001
Labour support									
Intercept	3.149	0.049	< .001	5.176	0.040	< .001	3.529	0.104	< .001
2012-2014 slope	0.018	0.013	.191	0.002	0.015	.914	0.075	0.040	.060
2015-2017 slope	0.016	0.008	.033	-0.017	0.008	.045	0.206	0.029	< .001
2018-2020 slope	0.107	0.013	< .001	0.207	0.011	< .001	0.577	0.035	< .001

Note. N = 5,213

Table 3. Voting proportions among each class across the 2014, 2017, and 2020 general elections.

	2014			2017			2020		
	Core National class	Core Labour class	Switcher class	Core National class	Core Labour class	Switcher class	Core National class	Core Labour class	Switcher class
No vote	0.016	0.040	0.030	0.013	0.027	0.031	0.025	0.031	0.024
Unsure/unreported	0.139	0.186	0.266	0.126	0.175	0.264	0.164	0.144	0.122
National party	0.781	0	0.378	0.789	0.001	0.225	0.731	0.005	0.006
Labour party	0.005	0.414	0.102	0.006	0.381	0.158	0.002	0.568	0.673
Other	0.059	0.36	0.224	0.066	0.416	0.322	0.078	0.252	0.175

Agreeableness and Openness to Experience. Thus, being open to new ideas, paired with a warmer and friendlier outlook, may have limited the amount of cross-party negative affect and hostility felt by this class and allowed its members to evaluate and be persuaded by political messaging from the Labour party. Compared to the Core National Class, they also tended to be less conservative and were initially less satisfied with the performance of the then-National Party government. Finally, the Switcher Class had higher levels of political efficacy, yet lower levels of political identity centrality, than the Core National Class. Thus, they tended to invest less of their self-image in their political beliefs and had a greater sense that they could influence political outcomes, likely leading to their tendency to switch preferences for the major parties—and perhaps even sway the outcome of elections—over time.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, higher levels of conservatism and initial levels of satisfaction with the then-National Party government set members of the Switchers Class apart from the Core Labour Class. They also had lower levels of political identity centrality (but higher efficacy), again suggesting that the investment of peoples' self-image in their political beliefs promotes commitment to a given political party. Notably, higher levels of openness to experience also predicted membership in the switcher class, relative to the Core Labour class. Thus, even though higher levels of openness to experience tend to be negative associated with conservatism, they also seem to be associated with higher rates of change in party support more broadly.

Table 4. Multinomial logistic regression model assessing demographic, personality, and political attitude predictors of membership in the Core National and Core Labour classes, relative to the Switcher Class.

	Core National class vs. Switcher class			Core Labour class vs. Switcher class		
	B	SE	p	B	SE	p
Gender	0.104	0.171	0.543	-0.093	0.214	.664
Age	0.019***	0.005	0.000	0.004	0.007	.513
European ethnicity	0.296	0.369	0.422	-0.477	0.475	.316
Extraversion	-0.030	0.070	0.672	-0.069	0.086	.418
Neuroticism	-0.115	0.071	0.107	-0.098	0.088	.264
Agreeableness	-0.228*	0.095	0.016	0.037	0.118	.752
Openness to Experience	-0.190*	0.083	0.023	-0.243*	0.102	.017
Conscientiousness	0.113	0.079	0.149	-0.070	0.100	.488
Conservatism	0.220**	0.068	0.001	-0.472***	0.093	<.001
Satisfaction with government	0.198***	0.043	0.000	-0.832***	0.055	<.001
Political efficacy	-0.128*	0.060	0.032	-0.155*	0.074	.036
Political identity centrality	0.123**	0.046	0.007	0.326***	0.060	<.001

Note. N = 3,105. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

DISCUSSION

In this study we decomposed New Zealanders' support for the National and Labour parties from 2011 – 2020 by examining the within-person trajectories of change in party support over (and also annually within) three consecutive election cycles. Rather than assuming all New Zealanders changed their party support in the same way over time, our analyses identified distinct latent classes that characterise different patterns of change for different groups of people over time. We thus accounted for potentially different types of party attachment (e.g., stable partisanship, polarization, and depolarization) in a unified analysis. We identified three classes of New Zealanders based on their trajectories of change in support for the parties over time. The Core National (50.5%) and Core Labour (39.1%) supporters maintained consistently high support for their respective party, and opposition toward the out-party. These classes align with the partisanship literature that specifically emphasises stable commitments to parties. That said, our analyses revealed even these classes exhibited changes in their support during the 2017 – 2020 election cycle, with the Core National class depolarizing (decreasing in support for National and increasing for Labour), and the Core Labour class polarizing. Thus, even New Zealanders who strongly preferred a particular party nonetheless responded to changes in the electoral context by adjusting their sense of support for the parties. By contrast, the Switcher class (10.4%) responded heavily to the electoral context and completely reversed their party preferences in the 2017 – 2020 period.

By modelling trajectories of change within each electoral cycle independently and examining ratings of party support rather than voting behaviour, we also identified nuances in the ways these classes changed preferences. With regards to Switchers specifically, these voters actually quite clearly supported the National party in 2011, and generally expressed opposition to the Labour party (i.e., with support ratings below the midpoint of the scale). It is thus notable that the third class identified was actually one in which there was a clear party preference; this class was not a fence-sitting class of voters who simply feel consistently moderate or low support for both parties (see Greaves et al., 2015) and perhaps vote randomly, or not at all, from election to election. Moreover, the class consistently depolarized in their preferences within each election cycle, rating the major parties more similarly by the end of the cycle compared to the start. This may suggest this group of voters are generally more likely to listen to and appreciate arguments and policy from the opposition party (in this case Labour) or may have experienced an underlying dissatisfaction with the performance of the National party.

Comparisons of the voting behaviours, demographics, personality and political attitudes of the classes provided further insight into their motivations. Our findings add to the limited past research on personality predispositions of vote switching by showing that, consistent with Bakker et al. (2016), openness to experience in particular distinguished the Switcher class from both the Core National and Core Labour classes. In other words, those more open to new and novel ideas were more likely to shift their party support over time, which further suggests these voters were responding in a considered manner to the political context. Interestingly, they tended to have higher levels of openness compared to both Core National and Core Labour supporters, despite a clear main association between openness and (low) levels of conservatism in the literature (Gerber et al., 2011; Osborne et al., 2021). Previous work has also revealed a negative association between openness to experience and both National and Labour party support in New Zealand, while controlling for both support for the other party and political orientation (Satherley et al., 2020). Despite the robustness of this association, recent research has shown that openness to experience does not predict conservatism over time (Osborne & Sibley, 2020). Indeed, when re-parameterizing our models based on the reference category, we found no association between openness to experience and membership in the Core National relative to Core Labour classes. Taken together, this suggests that openness to experience is simply negatively associated with the extremities of party support. On the whole, our results contribute to a nuanced understanding of how personality relates to political attitudes.

Additionally, the Switcher class was initially less satisfied than the Core National class with the performance of the National party government in 2011, and were more moderate than the core supporter classes in their political orientation. Switchers were also less likely to view their political beliefs as important to their sense of self, likely decreasing the need to support a party consistently in a partisan-like manner. Yet this group also had higher levels of political efficacy. The effects of political efficacy differ to those found in past research, where it has often been found to be negatively associated with vote switching (Dassonneville, 2012; Dejaeghere & Dassonneville, 2012). This difference may have occurred due to the focus of our study on longer term trends in attitude change (i.e., periods in which Switchers had a very real impact on the outcome of the election), rather than more brief behavioural vote switches between successive elections.

Finally, we did not find evidence of affective polarization in our analysis (i.e., a class becoming increasingly more supportive of their in-party and more opposed to the out-party). This is consistent with other work that has identified generally stable levels of affective polarization in New Zealand (i.e., Giddron et al. 2021). However, we show that this is the case even when considering the possibility that polarization may be increasing among only a specific sub-group of voters. Although our analyses do not allow us to rule out the possibility that no voters are becoming increasingly affectively polarized, they do suggest that any such pattern of change would be limited to a very small proportion of the population.

Nevertheless, our findings with regard to the Switcher class may also indirectly inform the affective polarization literature, suggesting openness to experience, and a more moderate level of investment of the self in one's political beliefs, may temper affective polarization. Indeed, past research in New Zealand has shown that openness to experience and (low) political identity centrality decrease the extent to which in-party support predicts out-party opposition (Satherley et al., 2021), and the current

research extends on this to show these variables are also associated with shifts in party support over time.

Strengths and Limitations

This study provides a novel examination of change in attitudes toward political parties over time in New Zealand. In contrast to past research, we focused on within-person changes in measures of support rather than reported voting behaviour. This modelling strategy highlighted that changes in electoral power between elections are indeed related to changes in people's attitudes over time (rather than changes in electorate composition or shifts between voting and non-voting). Our results also identify nuances in the 'vote switching' proportion of the public (i.e., that these New Zealanders have clear preferences for one party over another which change over time, as opposed to fence-sitters who are relatively apathetic). The voting proportions displayed in Table 3 also emphasize this analytic advantage given that quite large proportions of each supporter class either reported that they did not vote (2-4%) or were unsure of (or did not report) who they voted for at each election (12.2-27%). Notably, Switchers were both the most and least likely to fail to report their vote, depending on the election (they were least likely during the 2020 election where the Labour party's support soared, but most likely for the 2014 election). In other words, our analysis identifies a class of voters that defines a longer-term pattern of attitude change who could otherwise be overlooked in analyses of voting behaviour.

That our analyses identified theoretically meaningful classes that both aligned with aggregate trends in support seen across elections and matched within-class voting proportions over time is also encouraging given concerns raised about latent class trajectory analyses. Specifically, Sher et al. (2011) found that these modelling approaches use often identify the exact same 'cats cradle' patterns of growth (a consistently high class, consistently low, an increasing, and a decreasing class), even as study characteristics (e.g., periods and length of time and measures used) varied, raising questions over the meaningfulness of the classes. That we do not find this specific pattern, either over the full 9-year period or within election cycles, provides more confidence that our classes reflect meaningful differences in the population.

Although we are confident that our analyses identify distinct classes in the population, some caution should be taken when interpreting aspects of our findings. The classes identified here characterise key trends across the entire 9 years observed, and there is some degree of error in the classification of the classes. This accounts for why the Core National class represented 50.5% of the sample, even though their electoral support dropped to 30% of vote share at the 2020 election. Similarly, the voting proportions displayed in Table 3 show a shift in voting toward Labour (consistent with actual electoral outcomes), but the voting proportions at 2020 would still predict a heavy favouring of the National party. This again is because the classes account for the full 9-year period, which predominantly saw higher levels of support for National compared to Labour. Nevertheless, it remains an important indication of the validity of our classes that the voting patterns within each class generally track with the real outcomes of the national elections.

Although we identified a number of variables associated with the supporter classes, some of these variables (namely, the political attitude variables assessing satisfaction with the government, political identity centrality, and political efficacy) were single-item measures. While most effects were consistent with theoretical expectations, the effect of political efficacy did run counter to findings in past research. Although it is reasonable to expect political efficacy to be associated with support switching (for example, it may be instilled by shifts associated with prior election outcomes, and promote careful consideration of future outcomes), more research is needed to determine the reliability of this effect. Finally, it is not certain whether the Switchers identified here will be the same group of people who, eventually, shift their support back to the National party. That is, whether one group of swing voters consistently switch their preferences between parties, or whether different groups of voters may shift elections at different times, and for different reasons, or perhaps a combination of these two patterns.

Conclusion

Examining trajectories of within-person change in New Zealanders' support for the competing National and Labour parties from 2011 – 2020, we found that most New Zealanders can be considered either Core National (50.5%) or Core Labour (39.1%) supporters. These groups of New Zealanders maintained relatively stable levels of support for their respective party, as well as stable opposition toward the out-party. Switchers (10.4%), however, were tempted to cross party lines at each election, with their ratings of support for National and Labour drawing closer together until their preference reversed completely from 2017 – 2020. Among demographic, personality, and political attitude correlates of this profile, higher levels of openness to experience, but lower levels of political identity centrality, distinguished switchers from both Core National and Core Labour supporters, along with more moderate political orientation and initial levels of satisfaction with the 2011 National party government. Our analyses elucidate the different classes of voters in New Zealand over the 2011 – 2020, and encouragingly fail to identify a class of polarizing voters.

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