

Measuring the Dream? A review of the research report 'Living the Dream - Politics and Public Opinion in New Zealand' from Lord Ashcroft Polls¹.

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Many New Zealand social commentators may have been surprised in early November 2021 when a comprehensive social and political poll, focusing on New Zealand public opinion, was published by UK-based *Lord Ashcroft Polls*. Didn't the very name smack of conservative meddling in New Zealand's back yard?

Lord Ashcroft's twitter handle describes Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC as: *former Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party, an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster.*

Ashcroft clearly revels in his role as an influencer, and he has the extensive wealth to subsidise and promote his activities.

Still, he stands by his polling as providing an independent assessment of public opinion and he says on his website that he is committed to allowing the public to state its own mind whether or not it leans Conservative or otherwise. In the preface he explains his motives as being driven by three ideas.

First, he claims deep interest in New Zealand, having visited here many times and having friends who live here.

More convincingly, he says his motives align with those of the IDU (The International Democrat Union) which is a global alliance of centre-right parties for whom he has been exploring social dynamics on a comparative nation-by-nation basis.

Thirdly: Ashcroft is fascinated by the success of Jacinda Ardern's leadership and his poll was a means of assessing whether the factors at work here are a harbinger of potential changes in Europe or other regions. Where, he ponders, does this leave the National Party opposition. (National Party are members of the IDU.)

The poll report is 84 pages long and is based on public polling between August 9th – 24th of 5,129 individuals as well as upon eight focus groups conducted up and down the country in September 2021 including Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Manawatu and Tauranga.

The report fails its readers by not disclosing more exactly the nature of the polling: whether it was conducted online or by phone, (downloadable summary data label the data as online,) was it based on a ready-made research panel, how long the questionnaire was, what was the completion rate, and what efforts were made to achieve a fair and

¹ <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2021/10/living-the-kiwi-dream-politics-and-public-opinion-in-new-zealand/>

representative sample. For example was there quota sampling, and if so was this based on gender, age, region or ethnicity? The report merely says that participants “*were drawn from a Range of social, ethnic and political backgrounds – with equal numbers of men and women.*”

By today’s standards a sample size of 5,000 is generous, but the lack of transparency about method renders the results less credible than perhaps they should be.

At the outset the survey is designed on fairly standard ground. Respondents are asked about the importance of issues, (16 issues such as housing, health, law and order, COVID,) and then they are asked which political party would be better at handling each issue.

Given the timing of the fieldwork and National’s unpopularity at the time, it is not surprising that National scores badly. And this is the thing with political polls: a party can be deeply unpopular until quite suddenly, it’s not. Public sentiment can turn on a dime.

This is the challenge that Ashcroft faces with the data. He’s looking for straws in the wind that might indicate a vulnerability for the Ardern juggernaut, and for a few items of leverage on which National can find some grip.

The heart of the survey is a set of trade-off questions which test the leanings of respondents, and these are used quite effectively. The grand advantage of trade-off questions is that they reveal the boundaries and choices of respondents, whereas a battery of out-of-five questions, whether uni-polar (Don’t Agree at All up to Totally Agree,) or bi-polar (Strongly Disagree up to Strongly Agree,) are liable to deliver ambiguous results. We might both want our cake and to eat it too.

The contrast between different pairs of trade-off is sometimes very insightful.

When asked if it is right for the Government to mandate vaccination in certain circumstances to protect society from infectious diseases, or whether it is right for the Government to NOT interfere in people’s private healthcare decisions, there is a heavy lean toward the idea that the Government is right to get involved.

Meanwhile on a parallel question, when offered the option of the government taxing sugar or other unhealthy foods to promote healthy lifestyles or whether people should be free to make their own lifestyle choices without interference from government, the bulk of New Zealanders feel much more ambiguous than they do with vaccines. This time, National and Act supporters lean away from Government interference. In other words there isn’t always a black and white response to such questions as the degree to which Government should involve itself in the day to day lives of its citizens. With COVID we’re for it, with junk food we’re on the fence.

In the search for large and highly polarising issues, where National could find some potential traction, the report highlights failures in the provision of housing as well as the rights of Māori – for example in the plan for a Māori health authority. Might these cause ruptures in the social and political landscape?

On many trade-offs the respondents tend to answer in a manner consistent with their party allegiance. Is there any surprise that Labour party supporters feel New Zealand is heading in the right direction while National and Act voters feel, on average that New Zealand is heading in the wrong direction? Or that Labour Party people tend to feel that “*Life success is out of my hands*” while National supporters err closer to the sentiment that “*Life success is down to me?*”

Just how much these broadly expected differences of opinion matter at the time of elections is somewhat fluid. Ashcroft argues that some differences, which can be wide-ish when cut by party allegiance, (the divide over ‘wokism’ and ‘personal’ issues such as transgender rights,) are best left out of politicking. ‘*They are matters of personal decency and social acceptance.*’ He says. Some voices in the focus groups have enabled the report’s author to express these judgements, but Ashcroft’s authorial presence often belongs more to a party position paper than to a broad investigation of the status of the Kiwi dream. The data may be unbiased, but the interpretation is expressed in terms of National’s prospects.

In summary, the survey questionnaire makes a fair fist of capturing public opinion, as of August/September 2021, and the results look to be a fair snapshot. However the interpretation is largely framed, by Ashcroft’s polling alma mater: the recent history of the Labour and Conservative parties in the UK. He puts great store in the thesis that political parties go through four time-tested phases that take them from honeymoon through to bitter divorce. He applies this to the New Zealand context listening out for murmurs of discontent.

The National Party, by contrast, seems to people to be divided and demoralized, and with no clear sense of direction. It is hard to escape the parallels with the UK Conservatives in the early years of Tony Blair, when the Tories found it hard to gain a foothold in public debate. Add to that the presence of covid as the pre-eminent issue of the day, and – again, in common with Britain’s current Labour opposition – it is an uphill struggle to win any kind of hearing.

There is no quick or easy way back for a party in such a position, and no substitute for hard work and patience. (Former Tory leader William Hague predicted at the time that voters’ attitude to Blair’s New Labour would go through four phases: fascination, admiration, disillusionment and contempt. As he now says, he was right, but he didn’t expect it to take 13 years). This is especially true in the absence of a seismic catalyst for change on the scale of Brexit, which radically realigned party support in Britain and helped propel Boris Johnson to an 80-seat majority with the backing of many former Labour voters in seats the Conservatives would once have thought unwinnable.

He uses selected quotes from the eight focus groups to pry open potential weaknesses in the Labour Government but in his commentaries and interpretations Ashcroft doesn’t consider the large degree of overlap in opinion between people of different ages, ethnicities or even political leanings.

To the statements *Overall, life in New Zealand is better than it was 30 years ago* and *Overall, life in New Zealand is worse than it was 30 years ago* 49% of those who voted National in 2020 felt things have got better while 48% felt things had got worse. Of Labour voters the split was about the same: 52% felt life in New Zealand has got better, while 45% said 'worse'.

Or take two statements that run close to our views of the kiwi dream. Is it paradise lost as in: *Opportunities in this country are limited to too few people*, or is it still a land of promise as in: *There are always opportunities in this country if you're willing to work hard enough to take them*. Well, 80% of National voters agree with the latter statement. And Labour voters? 70% also agree with the second statement. Hardly a chasm. And on issue after issue there are only negligible, single digit, differences between the generations.

Nor does he consider any wild-card issues that could come along, much as Covid did in 2020, to totally disrupt the social and political landscape. He mentions Brexit as a seismic catalyst in the UK but doesn't go looking too intently for examples in New Zealand. How about issues such as the climate crisis and the challenges, fuelled by lockdowns and the pros and cons of work-from-home, that could greatly reshape our social and lifestyle priorities? Disruption abounds. We could have another COVID. Another Mosque Attack. Another earthquake. Even another emergent political superstar.

The problem with a snapshot poll is we get a clear picture of where things are at that instant, but we have little clue about how things will move in the future or the degree of risk that something may come along that changes the agenda completely. The Ashcroft poll is elegantly designed and well presented but it is engineered around a largely two-party pendulum model. That may be appropriate, until it isn't.

Apart from discounting disruptive forces it underplays the tendency of New Zealanders of different ages or political affiliations to share, to a great degree, attitudes about so many beliefs and issues. Lord Ashcroft is looking for wedge issues. Yet our broad areas of social agreement could potentially temper, or even amplify political change. Based on this data the electorate may be steadily swinging, or it may not be swinging much at all.