

Controlling the political narrative is key to winning the NZ election – no easy task for Chris Hipkins

Published: September 20, 2023 7.00am NZST

Author



1.

Suze Wilson

Senior Lecturer, School of Management, Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa – Massey University

Disclosure statement

Suze Wilson does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.64628/AA.f5ghsvmvq>

Last night's live TV leaders debate between Labour's Chris Hipkins and National's Christopher Luxon made clear the policy and leadership style differences between the two contenders to become New Zealand's next prime minister.

But as TVNZ's post-debate analysts tended to agree, neither candidate will have changed many minds – or reversed the main political poll trends since mid-year.

The so-called “bandwagon effect” describes how opinion polls can not only inform but sometimes influence electoral behaviour. Voters start aligning with whichever politician or

party seems to be gaining support and momentum, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy effect.

Based on recent polling, this might seem to favour the National Party. But the rise of New Zealand First and Winston Peters, and the relative decline in support for the ACT Party, means there is still an unpredictable element to this election.

For Labour's Chris Hipkins, it was important he not be perceived as a "dead man walking". He probably managed that. But arguably, his situation remains more akin to someone attempting to thread a needle while running – a difficult and risky thing to do.

More than political theatre

Attempts to analyse leadership often focus on personal attributes – such as skills, personality, character and decision-making – and how these influence the results a leader achieves.

But what leadership researchers call "followership" – in this case, voter attitudes, behaviours and expectations – matters greatly. So does the wider socioeconomic and cultural context in which a leader is operating. Weighing all these can help reveal how Hipkins is responding and performing as a political leader.

In a nutshell, his core challenge is to navigate adverse conditions in ways that rise above the mere theatrics of politics. He needs to connect with voter's values and interests, not just their current mood.

If Hipkins can do that, and with at least one recent poll suggesting the election could deliver a hung parliament, he could secure Labour a chance of forming the next government.



Chris Hipkins visits a relief supply depot in Hastings after Cyclone Gabrielle devastated parts of the North Island in February. Getty Images

Authenticity and fallibility

Hipkins is campaigning primarily on his and Labour's claimed desire and ability to support the "ordinary Kiwi" – that traditional target of most political parties. His own background as the "boy from the Hutt", along with his self-deprecating and pragmatic, centrist instincts, are important features of his appeal and credibility.

That pragmatism orients him to seek politically practical and achievable outcomes whatever the circumstances. The challenge, however, is to be both aspirational and positive while also not indulging unrealistic expectations.

Research shows people are more likely to trust and support leaders they see as being "one of us", and who they believe are genuinely motivated to act "for us".

To sustain that, leaders also need to show they can deliver. Hence the balance in Labour's advertising between its priorities for the coming term and its key achievements in government.

Hipkins has also emphasised the importance he attaches to just being himself, acknowledging he's not infallible. Describing the

government's COVID policies and some decisions that, with the benefit of hindsight, weren't optimal, he has said:

And that means you don't get everything perfect, and there's no point being defensive about it – you just have to own it.

Good leaders, according to some research, are authentic and know their weaknesses, but also possess the virtues needed to exercise wise judgment. Overall, the more voters trust Hipkins as a “safe pair of hands”, the more likely he is to win their support.



With then-prime minister Jacinda Ardern and finance minister Grant Robertson at a rally before the 2020 general election. Getty Images

Crafting a persuasive narrative

The flip side to Hipkins' pragmatism is that by not being bolder with policy, he risks giving people too few reasons to vote for Labour. His “middle ground” approach gives more political oxygen to parties on the left and right offering more radical change proposals.

And while policies might be the focus of campaigns and debates, politics remains an emotional experience for many voters. The

electoral mood becomes a significant factor. And, as one observer put it recently, the electorate is unusually “grumpy”.

Hipkin’s therefore needs to persuade undecided voters – and previous Labour voters thinking of voting for another party – to reassess any negative feelings they might have about Labour’s performance. He has to convince them their long-term material interests, rather than their current emotional state, will be better served by giving him their vote.

In a cost-of-living crisis, it’s tempting to look for someone to blame for life’s challenges. That is a gift to Labour’s opponents, keen to build a narrative of political and economic incompetence.

There is a counter-narrative, of course: inflation and government debt levels are both below the OECD average, New Zealand has had proportionally far fewer COVID deaths than elsewhere, and the country’s credit rating remains solid. But facts and logic may hold little sway.

In leadership research, the attempt to create or control the narrative is called the “management of meaning”. Unless Hipkins discovers an effective way to do this, he will struggle.

This is a common problem for incumbent governments, campaigning on their record of managing real-world, complex problems. For opposition parties, it’s easier to present simple solutions and make bold promises, or what researchers of populism have bluntly called “bullshit statements”.

Breaking through these barriers and appealing to voter’s actual interests over their emotions is no easy task. Chris Hipkins has just over three weeks to find a way.

- New Zealand
- Leadership
- Political leadership
- Voter behaviour
- Political polls
- NZ Labour Party
- Political opposition
- NZ Election 2023
- **Chris Hipkins**

Controlling the political narrative is key to winning the NZ election – no easy task for Chris Hipkins

Published: September 20, 2023 7:55am NZST

Getty Images

Last night's live TV [leaders debate](#) between Labour's Chris Hipkins and National's Christopher Luxon made clear the policy and leadership style differences between the two contenders to become New Zealand's next prime minister.

But as TVNZ's post-debate analysis tended to agree, neither candidate will have changed many minds – or reversed the main political poll trends since mid-year.

The so-called "[handwagon effect](#)" describes how opinion polls can not only inform but sometimes influence electoral behaviour. Voters start aligning with whichever politician or party seems to be gaining support and momentum, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy effect.

Author

 Steve Wilton
Senior Lecturer, School of Management, Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa – Massey University

Disclosure statement

Steve Wilton does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Partners



Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa – Massey University provides funding as a member of The Conversation NZ.

Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa – Massey University provides funding as a member of The Conversation AU.

[View all partners](#)

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.84628/AA.fghsvmq>



We believe in the free flow of information

Republish our articles for free, online or in print, under Creative Commons licence.

[Republish this article](#)

creating a self-fulfilling prophecy effect.

Based on recent polling, this might seem to favour the National Party. But the [rise of New Zealand First](#) and Winston Peters, and the relative decline in support for the ACT Party, means there is still an [unpredictable element](#) to this election.

For Labour's Chris Hipkins, it was important he not be perceived as a "dead man walking". He probably managed that. But arguably, his situation remains more akin to someone attempting to thread a needle while running – a difficult and risky thing to do.

 **Stuff.co.nz Politics**
@NZStuffPolitics · Follow

Analysis: Whichever way you cut it our next PM didn't set the world on fire in the leaders debate. Tova O'Brien punches out the parts, just how did each of the Chrises score? dlvr.it/SwLJ4T

5:06 AM · Sep 20, 2023

3 ❤️ Reply Copy link

[Read 8 replies](#)

More than political theatre

Attempts to analyse leadership often focus on personal attributes – such as [skills](#), [personality](#), [character](#) and [decision-making](#) – and how these influence the results a leader achieves.

Get news from NZ's top academics in one weekly email.

Please enter your email...

[Get newsletter](#)

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

But what leadership researchers call "[followership](#)" – in this case, voter attitudes, behaviours and expectations – matters greatly. So does the wider socioeconomic and cultural [context](#) in which a leader is operating. Weighing all these can help reveal how Hipkins is responding and performing as a political leader.

Read more: [NZ election 2023: combined poll trends now show a clear rightward shift since June](#)

In a nutshell, his core challenge is to navigate adverse conditions in ways that rise above the mere theatrics of politics. He needs to connect with voter's values and interests, not just their current mood.

If Hipkins can do that, and with at least one recent poll suggesting the election could deliver a hung parliament, he could secure Labour a chance of forming the next government.



Chris Hipkins visits a relief supply depot in Hastings after Cyclone Gabrielle devastated parts of the North Island in February. Getty Images

Authenticity and fallibility

Hipkins is campaigning primarily on his and Labour's claimed desire and ability to support the "ordinary Kiwi" – that traditional target of most political parties. His own background as the "boy from the Hutt", along with his self-deprecating and pragmatic, centrist instincts, are important features of his appeal and credibility.

That pragmatism orients him to seek politically practical and achievable outcomes whatever the circumstances. The challenge, however, is to be both aspirational and positive while also not indulging unrealistic expectations.

Research shows people are more likely to trust and support leaders they see as being “one of us”, and who they believe are genuinely motivated to act “for us”.

Read more: After the election, Christopher Luxon’s real test could come from his right – not the left

To sustain that, leaders also need to show they can deliver. Hence the balance in Labour’s advertising between its priorities for the coming term and its key achievements in government.

Hipkins has also emphasised the importance he attaches to just being himself, acknowledging he’s not infallible. Describing the government’s COVID policies and some decisions that, with the benefit of hindsight, weren’t optimal, he has said:

And that means you don’t get everything perfect, and there’s no point being defensive about it – you just have to own it.

Good leaders, according to some research, are authentic and know their weaknesses, but also possess the virtues needed to exercise wise judgment.

Overall, the more voters trust Hipkins as a “safe pair of hands”, the more likely he is to win their support.



With then-prime minister Jacinda Ardern and finance minister Grant Robertson at a rally before the 2020 general election. Getty Images

Crafting a persuasive narrative

The flip side to Hipkins' pragmatism is that by not being bolder with policy, he risks giving people too few reasons to vote for Labour. His "middle ground" approach gives more political oxygen to parties on the left and right offering more radical change proposals.

And while policies might be the focus of campaigns and debates, politics remains an emotional experience for many voters. The electoral mood becomes a significant factor. And, as one observer put it recently, the electorate is unusually "grumpy".

Hipkin's therefore needs to persuade undecided voters – and previous Labour voters thinking of voting for another party – to reassess any negative feelings they might have about Labour's performance. He has to convince them their long-term material interests, rather than their current emotional state, will be better served by giving him their vote.

In a cost-of-living crisis, it's tempting to look for someone to blame for life's challenges. That is a gift to Labour's opponents, keen to [build a narrative](#) of political and economic incompetence.


Read more: [Taxing questions: is National glossing over the likely cost of administering its new 'revenue measures'](#)?

There is a counter-narrative, of course: [inflation](#) and [government debt](#) levels are both below the OECD average, New Zealand has had proportionally far [fewer COVID deaths](#) than elsewhere, and the country's [credit rating](#) remains solid. But facts and logic may hold little sway.

In leadership research, the attempt to create or control the narrative is called the "[management of meaning](#)". Unless Hipkins discovers an effective way to do this, he will struggle.

This is a common problem for incumbent governments, campaigning on their record of managing real-world, complex problems. For opposition parties, it's easier to present simple solutions and make bold promises, or what researchers of populism have [bluntly called](#) "bullshit statements".

Breaking through these barriers and appealing to voter's actual interests over their emotions is no easy task. Chris Hipkins has just over three weeks to find a way.

 [New Zealand](#) [Leadership](#) [Political leadership](#) [Voter behaviour](#) [Political polls](#) [NZ Labour Party](#) [Political opposition](#)
[NZ Election 2023](#) [Chris Hipkins](#)

Add The Conversation to Your To-Do List

Some tasks are too important to put off. Organising your Will is one of the most impactful steps you can take for your future. While you're at it, consider leaving a gift in your Will to The Conversation.

By supporting independent, fact-based journalism, your legacy will help inform and inspire generations to come. It's a simple act with a powerful ripple effect.

[Find out more](#)