

1-7-2000

IBPP Feature Analysis: Political Sea Change or Mass-Mediated Political Spectacle? The 1999 Election Campaign in New Zealand

IBPP Regional Editor - Lawrence Alfred Powell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp>

 Part of the [Mass Communication Commons](#), and the [Other Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

IBPP Regional Editor - Lawrence Alfred Powell (2000) "IBPP Feature Analysis: Political Sea Change or Mass-Mediated Political Spectacle? The 1999 Election Campaign in New Zealand," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol8/iss1/4>

This IBPP Research Associates is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Bulletin of Political Psychology by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: IBPP Feature Analysis: Political Sea Change or Mass-Mediated Political Spectacle? The 1999 Election Campaign in New Zealand.

Author: Lawrence Alfred Powell

Volume: 8

Issue: 1

Date: 2000-01-07

Keywords: Elections, Ideology, Mass Media, New Zealand, Postmodernism

The following analysis was written by IBPP Regional Editor Dr. Lawrence Alfred Powell, Department of Political Studies, University of Auckland, New Zealand.

New Zealand (NZ) recently convulsed its way (as of 27 November) through the last of a series of rather odd 1990s national elections. During the decade of the 1990s, popular electoral preferences here have reflected an identity-confused collision between two types of politics. On the one hand, there has been the old traditional left vs. right, labour vs. business "modern-era" politics of class-related interests. On the other hand, an emergent new mass-mediated "post-modern" politics of impression management has arisen alongside the expanding influence of television, the computer, and other pervasive telecommunications media.

On the surface at least, the recent electoral victory of Labour's Helen Clark as new prime minister and the formation of a viable Labour-Alliance-Greens voting majority in the parliament has been heralded as a "leftward swing" in the pendulum-like vacillation of popular preferences between business-friendly and labour-friendly governments. After weathering a decade of National's right-wing, privatising, market-driven "economic rationalist" policies, New Zealanders found considerable appeal in the idea of a newly-elected "left" coalition which promised to (1) "close the gap" between rich and poor and between Maori and Pacific Islanders and other New Zealanders, (2) raise the personal tax on incomes above \$60,000, (3) to repeal the Employment Contracts Act (which had scaled back employee/union rights), (4) to reverse cuts in superannuation benefits, (5) to give students a fairer loan scheme, and (6) return income-related rents to tenants.

Contrary to the "end of ideology" arguments, all of this accords rather well with early factor-analytic studies by Eysenck (and subsequent studies of political values over several decades) that have shown "radicalism-conservatism" (as Eysenck termed it) to be a persistent primary dimension in basic human political perceptions and value preferences. Moreover, the ongoing relevance of Eysenck's second major dimension, "tough- vs. tender-minded", is also currently underlined in NZ politics. The 1999 election saw increased popular interest in the "get-tough" political appeals of Richard Prebble and his ACT party (NZ equivalent of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party in Australia, though not as extremist). And at the "tender-minded" pole, there was a groundswell of popular support for the Green party (one of whose newly-elected MP's, now sitting in the NZ parliament, is a marijuana-smoking Rastafarian, complete with dreadlocks). During the recent NZ electoral contest, both of these latter parties advanced philosophies and policies that tended to cut across (were orthogonal to) those of the standard left-right political dimension.

However, beyond the obvious right-to-left shift that has recently taken place, at another perhaps deeper level this last NZ election of the century has also seen the development of a less-acknowledged but perhaps ultimately more fundamental and ongoing shift in the nature of the basic democratic political process. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s and accelerating through the 1990s, New Zealand--like other modern industrialised democracies--has witnessed the slow, steady emergence of an increasingly

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

American-style "post-modern politics" periodically punctuated by what W. Lance Bennett terms "post-modern elections". With the growing societal reliance on telecommunications technologies like television and the computer in recent decades, the political "realities" of electoral politics have increasingly become "mass-mediated" ones. In this altered political environment, skillful orchestration of symbolic messages by spin-doctors and "media-minders" (NZ term for political consultants) and the resultant manipulation of mass public perceptions have increasingly become as formative in shaping political outcomes as the tangible realities of class interests, group resources, and economic conditions. While the structure of society and the material conditions of competing class interests remain important, political momentum in elections increasingly occurs in conjunction with concerted efforts at mass persuasion through the use of political language and political gestures via orchestrated electronic mass-media appeals to electorates.

The question of "who defines" (of who will be in a position to "frame debates" over social issues and determine which interpretations are deemed appropriate to place on the national agenda for public consideration) becomes an increasingly pivotal source of power and strategic advantage in these post-modern, mass-mediated electoral contests. The most widely-recognised exponent of this perspective, Murray Edelman, has argued that postmodern-era elections increasingly take the form of sensationalistic "political spectacles" to which citizen/voters daily find themselves exposed through tabloid-style media accounts. While these arbitrary accounts of political "reality" contain ample "symbolic reassurances", there is usually less tangible information content on which citizens could act to make a concrete difference in their lives. Thus, the capacity for participatory democracy is diminished. As evidenced in the NZ electoral contest this year, "eyewitness" media coverage in postmodern elections increasingly tends to emphasize visual imagery and emotional appeals over the 'substance' of rational public discourse. Political "news," presented by "Barbie & Ken" newscasters, tends to be dramatised, fragmented, personalised, commercialised, and morselised. So-called campaign "events" tend to be staged (pseudo-events) rather than spontaneously-occurring. "Debates" between candidates are in fact heavily scripted in advance, including the body language and newsworthy "sound bites," and are perhaps better described as "joint press conferences." Emotional appeals tend to prevail over ideas, symbols over substance, personal images over public issues. Though fortunately not yet as thoroughly commercialised and professionalised as in the U.S., all of these "political spectacle" features were, nevertheless, present in some form in the recent electoral contest in New Zealand. It may well be that this longer-term general trend towards emergence of an American-style postmodern, mass-mediated electoral style will in time come to be seen as a more lasting outgrowth of the 1999 election than the dramatic, but nevertheless probably ephemeral, leftward shift. (See Eysenck, H.J. (1988). *Psychology of politics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Bennett, W.L. (1992). *The governing crisis: Media, money, and marketing*. New York: St. Martins Press; Edelman, M. (1988). *Constructing the political spectacle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Bennett, W.L. (1996). *News: The politics of illusion*. New York: Longman; Postman, N. (1986). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. New York: Viking Penguin, Inc.; Robinson, C. & Powell, L.A. (1996.) *The postmodern politics of context definition: Competing reality frames in the Hill-Thomas political spectacle*. *Sociological Quarterly*, 37, 279-305.) (Keywords: Elections, Ideology, Mass Media, New Zealand, Postmodernism.)