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ELECTORAL CHANGE, INERTIA AND CAMPAIGNS IN NEW ZEALAND

The First Modern FPP Campaign in 1987 and the First MMP Campaign in 1996

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ABSTRACT

Electoral change creates important and competing incentives for political parties, parliamentary elites and candidates to transform their campaign techniques in order to maximize votes under the new realities – a process constrained by continued reliance on familiar techniques. In this article I examine two significant moments of electoral change in New Zealand – from partisan stability to dealignment in the late 1980s, and from an SMP/plurality system to Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) representation in 1996 – as a way of exploring inertia and change in the transformation of campaigns at the constituency level. Drawing on findings from in-depth interviews conducted with individuals responsible for the parties' campaigns in the 1987 and 1996 New Zealand general elections, I explore the extent to which political campaign elites, parliamentarians and candidates responded to incentives to adopt a fundamentally new election campaign logic – in these two cases, dictated by the new tactical centrality of marginal seats and geographically defined constituencies in the modern first-past-the-post (FPP) campaign, and then by the ascendancy in their place of the party list vote, issue constituencies and nationwide campaigns under MMP.

KEY WORDS ■ campaigns ■ constituency ■ electoral change ■ mixed member proportional ■ New Zealand

Introduction

Election campaigns – their strategies, techniques and technologies – are the product of the electoral systems within which they are waged (Katz, 1980). Because electoral rules determine the fundamental logic for translating votes

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into seats, they significantly affect the competitive calculus employed by parties and candidates to secure those votes, creating powerful incentives to adopt and utilize those techniques best-suited for maximizing the vote within a given set of electoral rules. Despite these imperatives, however, campaign tacticians and entrepreneurs are regularly constrained by the available financial and human resources, as well as by the inertia, uncertainty and distrust of change felt by those whose electoral fortunes may nonetheless hang in the balance – conflicting impetuses that are perhaps most evident in times of watershed electoral developments.

Two such electoral transformations were New Zealand's transition in the late 1980s from tranquil, stable, predictable politics to a fractured, volatile electoral landscape and, in 1996, its switch from a long-established Single Member Plurality (SMP) system to Mixed Member Proportional representation (MMP). With both changes, New Zealand's electoral entrepreneurs confronted a fundamentally new logic – and a variety of new requisites – for winning votes and securing victory. And yet, especially at the constituency level, these imperatives were unevenly realized (Denemark, 1998), thus pointing to the ability of inertia – by political elites and candidates, as well as by voters – to stymie the wilful transition from one framework of electoral campaign logic to the next.

In this article I examine the themes of political inertia,[1] learning and adaptation in the context of the country's fitful revolution from traditional to modern campaigns, and then explore these themes with respect to New Zealand's first MMP election campaign. I do so as a way to assess, at moments of electoral change, the extent to which political campaign elites, party organizational leaders and parliamentarians respond to the frequently differential incentives to adopt a fundamentally new election campaign logic – in these two cases, dictated by the new tactical centrality of marginal seats and geographically defined constituencies in the modern first-past-the-post (FPP) campaign, and then by the ascendancy, in their place, of the party list vote, issue constituencies and nationwide campaigns under MMP. I also explore the impact of several constraints on these actors' tactical responses to electoral transition, including financial resources, organizational strength (especially party membership) and the will to embrace campaign techniques from other political organizations already employing alternative approaches. Throughout this essay, I draw significantly from the findings of four sets of in-depth interviews conducted with those responsible for the parties' election campaigns in the 1987, 1990 and 1996 New Zealand general election campaigns.[2]

From Traditional to Modern Campaigns in New Zealand

New Zealand's tranquil Westminster system, with its disciplined party politics and executive-dominated caucuses (Jackson, 1992), until a tumultuous

turnaround in the mid-1980s, supported stable, predictable, partisan-oriented blocs of loyalties (Nagel, 1988; Vowles, 1995) and traditional campaigns reflective of these influences. These campaigns were, in general, low profile, non-professional, nationally focused and susceptible to local MP demands for attention, irrespective of the seats' overall strategic importance (Denemark, 1991). More specifically, New Zealand's campaigns tended to be short (three to four weeks), had as their focal points the detailed presentation of policy platforms in the form of manifestos and pamphlets (Cleveland, 1980), and used mass rallies in urban centres as showcases for the party leaders and, with some regularity, the entire cabinet or shadow cabinet (Garnier and Levine, 1981). Similarly, TV was resisted by New Zealand's party organizations until relatively late – not playing an important role in terms of conveying campaign themes through the party leaders until 1978 (Cleveland, 1980). At the same time, two of the most important constituency-level campaign activities – marginal seats polling and direct mail techniques – were adamantly opposed by both the New Zealand Labour Party and the National Party (Denemark, 1992: 164). When combined with legislated restrictions on MPs' personal constituency-level campaign expenditures (set at $NZ5,000 through the 1987 campaign)[3] New Zealand's election campaigns were bound to remain non-professional, poorly funded, weakly centralized affairs with virtually no significant strategic role for local-level campaigning. They were, in short, reflections of the nation's electoral stability and the predictable blocs of votes it sustained.

Electoral Volatility and the First Modern Campaign in 1987

New Zealand's programmatic and electoral tranquillity was shattered in the 1980s, precipitating pervasive change in its electoral politics and, as a consequence, its election campaigns. After nearly a half century commitment to social democratic politics premised on an interventionist state, active welfarism and alliances with the union movement, the New Zealand Labour Party, given stagnating productivity and erosions in the country's balance of trade, pursued an electrifyingly radical transformation of its historical platform. Convinced of the need to reverse its course following its election in 1984, a Labour cabinet coterie of market-liberal reformers abandoned outright the party's commitment to full employment, welfarism, progressive taxation and state ownership (Boston and Holland, 1987). In so doing, Labour embraced what most voters viewed as the 'politics of surprise' (Vowles and Aimer, 1993: 147), prompting many in the lead-up to the 1987 general election to reconsider their political loyalties (Vowles, 1995: 100), and forcing, especially, Labour's campaign elite for the first time to contemplate a wholly different campaign to attract votes from a newly fractured, volatile electorate. In short, New Zealand's parliamentarians and campaign entrepreneurs confronted precisely the imperative that Agranoff (1978)

argues compels the creation of the modern campaign,[4] and its tactical reliance on centralized campaign structures, polling and research-determined advertising, and the pursuit of votes through targeted, particularized messages in key, marginal seats.

Faced with revolt in its own voter heartland, and the almost certain prospect of occupying the opposition benches after only three years in government, Labour forged New Zealand's first modern campaign. This transformation was assisted by Labour's adoption of existing techniques from American, British and Australian campaigns (Denemark, 1992: 167) and its ability to pay for them using the largest campaign budget in New Zealand's history ($3.5 million), which had been swollen by big business contributions eager to have Labour continue its newly pro-market policies (Vowles, 2002a: 420). At the same time, Labour was propelled down the professional path by its low levels of party membership (approximately 10,000 versus National's estimated 100,000), which limited its ability to conduct local-level canvassing using volunteers. As a consequence, Labour approached the 1987 election with both the incentives and financial means for conducting a centralized, professional, technically intensive campaign. With its parliamentary elite unified around electoral transformation and its otherwise sceptical party organization willing to cooperate, given Labour's promise of a second term return to social policy priorities, the stage was set for Labour strategically to respond to electoral uncertainty by building New Zealand's first modern campaign.

Labour's central goal was to retain the votes of those disaffected blue-collar workers, women and the young who were tempted to abstain due to dissatisfaction about Labour's economic policies (but viewing the National Party as an impossible alternative), while attracting new support from those white collar investors who had benefited from Labour's new market-liberal orientation. Critical in this process was the securing of sufficient votes in key marginals to win vital seats despite a projected overall swing to National.

The implications of Labour's new tactical priorities were seen perhaps most obviously at the constituency level in two key aspects of the campaign – polling and constituency targeting and centralized organization/localized campaigning.

1. Polling and Constituency Targeting

Prior to 1987, Labour's polling was spotty and amateurish – reliant on published polls and on volunteers to do telephone surveys on broad issues in order to create national snapshots of support (Denemark, 1991: 263). Faced with the need to retain votes from those alienated by its harsh economic reforms, Labour instituted a bold new regime of qualitative, tracking, and marginal-electorate polls – qualitative polls to assist in designing advertisements to placate incensed supporters; tracking polls to gauge the impact of shifts in Labour's advertisements and policy statements; but

most importantly, marginal-electorate polls to enable Labour's campaign strategists and advertising experts to target key groups of potential deserters and converts within a 'hit list' of ten constituencies amongst the nation's 97 seats (Denemark, 1991: 264). The constituency-level distribution of direct mail pamphlets and personalized letters, as well as the allocation of funding and tactical support to local party organizations, were dictated by these polls and their interpretation in the campaign's 'Head Office' in Wellington.

2. Centralized Organization/Localized Campaigning

The nemesis of the modern campaign's tactical apportionment of resources is precisely what had been the hallmark of traditional campaigns in New Zealand: ad hoc campaign organizations without the technical means or authority to draw resources and strategic discretion to the centre, thereafter to be targeted to the local level as part of a larger tactical plan. Labour's 1987 modern campaign, as the considered antidote to parochialism in its constituency-level organizations, built a focused, centralized campaign apparatus around a Strategy Committee and a Marginal Seats Committee within its Wellington Head Office. Both committees were given the necessary decision-making power to: (a) command resources from the party's electorate organizations and financial network; (b) allocate those funds strictly within key marginal seats; (c) target its media advertising and direct mail appeals solely to its key groups; (d) develop a central, computerized index of party membership and finances; and (e) direct the Prime Minister's tour to marginal electorates. All in all, Labour's 1987 campaign can be characterized as 'tightly managed' (Wilson, 1989: 129), frequently dictating campaign matters down to 'fine detail . . . at the local level in the marginals' (James, 1987: 60).

In sum, faced with defeat in a newly fragmented electoral landscape, and bolstered by financial strength and organizational unity, Labour created New Zealand's first modern campaign built around the centrally dictated use of resources and the strategic targeting of appeals by the central campaign at the local constituency level. In so doing Labour's 1987 campaign significantly redefined the role of constituency-level activities from informal, amateurish and parochial organizations, to ones tightly bound to the strategic impetus of the Head Office. These constituency-level transformations are perhaps best brought into relief by considering the National Party's tradition-bound campaign in 1987, and the metamorphosis of its campaign apparatus into a modern one, in the 1990 election.

The 1987 National Party Campaign: Inertia and Defeat

Unlike New Zealand Labour's domination by a modernizing parliamentary elite, intent on transforming the party, its programme and its campaign

apparatus, the National Party headed into the 1987 general election having allowed a new generation of modernizers to fade from its organizational ranks (James, 1987), while reeling from deep divisions within its party organizational structure (James and McRobie, 1987). Overall, this internal fracture meant National could not develop an equivalent to Labour's centralized, wilful campaign structure, capable of imposing reform on the party and resisting the self-serving demands of its safest constituencies for party resources, advertising and leader tours (Denemark, 1992: 168). As a consequence, despite being confronted with the same imperatives as Labour to respond to New Zealand's fractured electorate and voter uncertainty, National, by default, had to rely on its well-worn campaign techniques and place its hopes with Labour being unable to sell voters on its 'half-time message' – that it deserved three more years to prove its programmatic worth (James, 1987: 58).

Irrespective of strategic will, National in 1987 had limited resources with which to wage its campaign – its traditional big-business contributions having 'dried up' due to Labour's usurping of its pro-market policies. The result was an operating budget ($1–1.5 million) less than half of Labour's, which all but precluded the use of expensive campaign techniques such as professional polling and direct mail. Though National was resource-rich in terms of party membership, these volunteers were to prove ineffectual in the absence of centrally coordinated tactics, geared to key, marginal seats. At the same time, National's exploitation of its links with the Australian Liberal Party was limited to hiring someone for the relatively minor role of assessing its daily media coverage, while Labour utilized an Australian Labor Party pollster to conduct all of its qualitative and quantitative polling (Denemark, 1992: 167, 172).

Thus, because National remained bound to its traditional, weak-kneed central campaign organization, it failed to embrace a number of strategic components of the modern campaign. Perhaps most important was National's shunning of qualitative tracking and marginal-electorate polling. Instead, it relied on published ad hoc polls run by volunteers in local party organizations, while resisting techniques such as targeted advertising and direct mail (Denemark, 1992: 169). With no consistent or accurate polling and no centralized strategy, despite deciding on a hit list of marginal seats and a few key groups of swinging voters, National never apportioned its resources, nor geared its issue appeals to giving priority to the securing of those votes. At the same time, the lack of centralized authority to impose a strategic plan on myopic local party organizations meant, among other things, that leader Jim Bolger's three-week tour was regularly diverted to National's safe seats solely to placate these organizations (Denemark, 1992: 173).

In short, while National confronted the same fractured electorate as Labour, it remained resistant to the transformation of its campaign techniques, perhaps in part due to its hope that Labour's programmatic

controversies would cost it victory without the need to suffer the pain of overhauling its own campaign apparatus. But of paramount importance in National's inertia was its lack of a parliamentary and party organizational elite convinced of the efficacy of modern techniques (Denemark, 1991: 273–4). In an era of stable, predictable blocs of votes, National's shortcomings would have been of little overall consequence. However, in a new era of shifting voters and fractured support, National's organizational lethargy invited electoral defeat. In the end, Labour alone achieved what it set out to do – secure victory through a swing in its favour of 0.4 percent within the 17 most marginal constituencies, thereby maximizing vote gains where they counted most (Boston and Jackson, 1988). At the same time, the nationwide swing to National of 2.7 percent secured it only an additional three years in opposition.

National: Lessons Learned in Defeat

Following National's defeat in 1987, the party's organizational elite split between those who refused to acknowledge the deleterious impact of National's electoral traditionalism, and those who argued the party must embrace modern campaign techniques. National's party president and parliamentary whip continued to insist that its defeat in 1987 was due solely to economic buoyancy precluding them any chance of victory, irrespective of the campaign techniques utilized. But an increasingly vocal group attributed the party's loss to its now-inappropriate techniques, and called for a new reliance on polling, television and targeted direct mail in key constituencies (Denemark, 1992: 180–1) – ultimately convincing vital elements in National's parliamentary and organizational elite of the need for change.

With the election of a new party president in August 1989 on a platform of transforming National's campaigning, the party set about introducing all the components that comprise a modern campaign: extensive market research and polling at both the national and local levels; targeting and direct mail in marginal electorates; strict coordination of local party and constituency campaign information in order to maximize consistent appeals; and the creation of a marginal seats committee to monitor campaign effects in key marginals (Collinge, 1990: 2–3). National also affirmed a new professionalism for its party and campaign organization, evident in the downgrading of its reliance on a mass volunteer base, its utilizing of professional staff to accrue its sizeable war chest (only roughly $1.5 million of a far larger amount being spent on the campaign) and its hiring of an Australian Liberal Party pollster. Altogether, National successfully employed a wide range of modern campaign techniques in its 1990 election campaign – the party's elite fully convinced of their contribution to National's largest ever victory (Collinge, 1990: 8).[5]

In summary, New Zealand's transformation from a tranquil electorate renowned for its stable blocs of votes and high turnout to a fractured, volatile and disaffected electorate in the 1980s served to precipitate the turn to the modern campaign and its redefinition of constituency-level campaign activities within a centralized strategic and organizational framework. Labour's embracing of these techniques in 1987, three years before National, seems due primarily to the party having a parliamentary elite committed, ironically, to both the radically transformative policies that made the modern campaign necessary, and to the techniques necessary to respond to the party's resultant vulnerability. Labour's adoption of these largely professional techniques was also propelled by its inability to rely on party member volunteers to conduct mass canvassing, and by its ability to tap New Zealand's largest campaign budget in 1987 to underwrite the use of modern polling, direct mail and advertising techniques.

National, with a parliamentary and party organizational elite dominated by individuals ignorant about and suspicious of modern techniques, remained resistant to change, and lacked the organizational coherence and impetus to pursue a new course. However, Labour's 1987 victory in key marginal constituencies served to sweep aside National's resistance and usher in a modernizing regime committed to creating a professional funding base, and implementing organizational, tactical and technical change in the party's campaign apparatus. In short, the New Zealand case suggests that while electoral systems theoretically provide imperatives for pursuing the sort of campaign best-suited for maximizing votes, defeat – or the threat of it – may represent a necessary, but not sufficient, impetus for the transformation of the election campaign. The elevation of a wilful elite dedicated to this task is also important, given the difficulties of supplanting familiar techniques and ongoing claims for money, time and energy made by safe-seat constituencies.

Campaigning Under Mixed Member Proportional Representation

If the hallmark of modern election campaigns in SMP parliamentary systems is the targeting of votes in a relatively few marginal seats, a crucial consequence is the division of the electorate into votes that are either of strategic importance or are destined to be 'wasted votes' cast in constituencies whose outcomes are essentially foregone conclusions. MMP, however, employs a fundamentally different logic for translating votes into seats, thereby necessitating a wholly different calculus for parties to maximize their share of the vote. New Zealand's system of MMP, introduced in the 1996 general election (see Denemark, 2001: 95), gives voters two votes – one for a local constituency (or electorate) candidate, elected by a plurality vote, and the other for a party list of candidates. Nationwide tallies of the party list vote

are used to determine each party's overall presence in the 120-seat unicameral parliament – 65 constituency MPs and 55 party list MPs in 1996 – thus creating a powerful incentive for campaigns to give priority to the maximization of party list votes wherever they may be found. In short, MMP destroys the FPP primacy of geographical constituencies, marginal seats and critical or wasted votes and, instead, promotes a tactical emphasis on issue constituencies and nationwide appeals for party list votes.

Clearly, then, New Zealand's parliamentary and party organizational elites in 1996 confronted the need to transform their campaigns in order to secure victory under the new MMP electoral rules. And yet, as we will see, especially at the constituency level, competing incentives for change again played an important role in constraining political elites' ability to implement a wholly new regime of campaign techniques in 1996. Important in this process was the ingrained logic and electoral security from previous FPP campaigns, which made it difficult for many local constituency actors to jettison the old system's orientation around safe and marginal seats and undertake intensive campaign activities for the list vote where campaigns had never been hotly contested before.

Maximizing the Party List Vote: New Zealand as 'One Marginal Seat'

By using a nationwide tally of party list votes as the central mechanism for determining the number of MPs each party will have in parliament, MMP creates incentives to pursue small pockets of votes heretofore ignored in opponents' safe seats, as well as to top up a party's own tally in its own historically safe seats. This is the case because while, in the past, constituencies with more than about a 5 percent pre-election margin were reduced to strategic irrelevance, under MMP 'every vote counts', and no constituency can afford to be ignored.

Consistent with MMP's new logic, in the 24 months preceding the 1996 election, parties began to advertise in and visit areas that had never previously seen that party's advertisements or organizers before. Labour, in late 1994, placed advertisements in every local community newspaper in New Zealand – including some that had never previously seen Labour advertising (Denemark, 1996: 413). National, too, initiated campaign activities in, especially, working class areas where its historically poor performance had led it to abandon all campaigning. Similarly, during the 1996 campaign proper, all parties devoted significant resources to sending out blanket coverage and nationwide household mailings of generic brochures.

Thus, on the face of things, these patterns of campaign activity point to New Zealand's campaign entrepreneurs as having successfully negotiated the transition from FPP's marginal-seats orientation to the nationwide dictates of MMP. However, despite the parties' self-proclaimed intentions

in 1996 to approach New Zealand as 'one marginal seat', survey data have shown that individuals' overall exposure to the seven major parties' campaign materials varied significantly by level of seat marginality in 1996 (see Denemark, 1998). The survey patterns provide evidence of the parties engaging in significantly greater constituency-level activities in marginal than in safe seats, while they also focused their efforts in their own safe seats rather than in those of their opponents.

Both Labour and National, it seems clear, were tempted to place local campaign emphasis on the familiar territory of marginal seats or on their own safe seats, while ignoring the unfamiliar turf of opponents' strongholds. While there is theoretically no distinction under MMP between the electoral benefit of raising party list votes from 20 percent to 30 percent in an opponent's safe seat and raising the tally of list votes from 60 percent to 70 percent in one's own safe seat, there are, nonetheless, logistic cost considerations and factors of inertia that can help to explain the bimodal patterns of marginal-seat orientation and a bias towards one's own safe seats in the 1996 MMP campaign. I examine these factors in detail in the next two sections.

Explaining Parties' Marginal-Seats Orientation in 1996

While parties under MMP are assumed to give priority to issue constituencies and demographic profiles of voters – pursuing pockets of those votes wherever they can be found – issue constituencies tend to be concentrated geographically, since residential areas are frequently homogeneous, both in terms of socio-economic indices and the politics those realities sustain (Denemark, 1996: 414). New Zealand's parties are likely to have concentrated their local campaign efforts, such as canvassing, leafleting and billboard and newspaper advertising, amongst larger concentrations of potential supporters rather than incur the multiple start-up costs involved in building numerous smaller efforts across a large geographical area. Thus, parties might well have focused on their own safe seats because of the larger reservoir of potential supporters in close proximity. At the same time, large pockets of party support typically mean the existence of larger ranks of volunteers, even if historically poorly marshalled during the previous FPP era due to the safe vote margin of the seat. Parties would have attempted, then, to maximize their party list vote in areas with potential volunteer support to assist in local campaigning. Interviews with party campaign organizers in 1996 confirm this organizational strategy as one of their considerations. Labour, for example, fully expected in the months prior to their launch of the 1996 campaign that it would 'gain more bang per buck' by focusing its efforts in areas with strong 'on-the-ground' support (Denemark, 1996: 415).

At the same time, there are several reasons to have expected high levels

of campaign activities in marginal seats, especially in this, the first campaign under New Zealand's new electoral logic. First, constituencies with a marked stronghold for a given party may have sustained that party orientation across time, and with it an increasingly senior, high-profile incumbent burdened with cabinet responsibilities that may have been regarded as both demanding, and as more deserving of, the parliamentarian's time (see, e.g., Studlar and McAllister, 1996: 81). Thus, New Zealand's MPs with large electoral margins under the old FPP system are likely not to have waged an aggressive constituency campaign in the recent past, while the FPP central party organizations would have also dismissed their local campaign activity in these seats as irrelevant. In short, safe seats under New Zealand's outgoing FPP system are likely to have sustained a local culture of electoral passivity that, despite the new incentives for wide-ranging campaigning under MMP, would have proven a difficult legacy to supplant, at least in the first campaign under proportional representation.

And, indeed, interviews with the major party campaign organizers in 1996 emphasized the difficulties they had in prompting their constituency MPs, especially in safe seats, to campaign hard for list votes. National's campaign director, Lindsay Tisch, for example, argued that National's lack of 'urgency' in its safest seats in 1996 was the result of a tradition of campaign inactivity in those seats – inertia that he referred to as a 'first-past-the-post mentality', which proved to be a major impediment to the party's central campaign strategies. Tisch identified the central organizational priorities for future election campaigns as convincing National's strong incumbent MPs to work for the party list vote, and convincing cabinet-level list MPs to work for the list vote nationally. Perhaps because of this local-level organizational inertia, the parties clearly placed important emphasis on distributing campaign materials within their own safe seats, likely in part to attempt to secure the list vote from the large numbers of their own stalwarts, and to counter the lacklustre aura that might otherwise have characterized local, safe seat campaigns.

Thus, New Zealand's political parties in the first campaign under a new set of electoral rules shied away from attempting to build local-level campaigns in their opponent's safe seats, while trying both to sustain the momentum in marginal seats, and to kindle constituency activity and list vote allegiance amongst voters in safe seats. The resulting bimodal patterns of local-level campaign activities in 1996 – marginal seats and parties' own safe seats – represent a curious halfway transition from an FPP to an MMP campaign – neither universal coverage, nor solely focused on marginal seats.

These patterns are also evident in the 1996 patterns of constituency candidate campaign expenditures. Labour's and National's spending was highest in marginal constituencies and then in each party's own safe seats – with lowest local-level spending occurring in the unfamiliar territory of the opponent's safe seats where, as we have seen, parties had difficult times promoting campaign activity (see Denemark, 1998).

Constituency Candidate Activity and Party List Vote Maximization[6]

A central problem that plagued all parties in 1996 was convincing constituency candidates to work for the party list vote. One of the most important strategic deficiencies that campaign coordinators pointed to was the widespread assumption that a constituency candidate's campaign activity would necessarily promote parties' list votes. However, as mentioned above, many voters were keen to split their tickets and signal their preferences for coalition partnerships, while others viewed the party list vote as a 'free vote' for casting ideologically.[7] While most parties designed pamphlets, videos and bumper stickers imploring voters to, for example, 'Tick Labour Twice', the underestimation of the list vote's importance was frequently held by candidates as well.

For many candidates, the focus on the constituency campaign was due to the loss of their individual security, caused by the restructuring necessary to implement the new electoral system. Because the introduction of MMP in 1996 involved the reduction of parliament's number of electorate seats to 65 from 99 under the old FPP system, many felt the need to concentrate on their electorate campaign because the changing of the seat's geographical boundaries, and thus its political make-up, made them uncertain for the first time about the electoral dynamics of their own seat (Vowles, 1998: 19–20).[8]

These tensions were clearly apparent in the Labour camp. Many of Labour's constituency candidates focused virtually purely on their own electorates because their low placement on the party list meant they did not view the list vote, and election off the list, as a 'lifeline' for them. Indeed, Labour's general secretary, Rob Allen, argued that many Labour constituency MPs worked against a campaign for the list vote, and estimated that 70 percent of Labour's parliamentary caucus felt they would get to parliament solely through their own efforts, rather than through the list. Allen felt, in the end, Labour's shift from an FPP marginal-seats campaign to a party list-vote maximization campaign was only 'minimally successful'.

The smaller parties, perhaps even more than the major parties, had severe difficulties in attracting party list votes. United's leader, Peter Dunne, for example, said that their candidates tended to concentrate on their own seats, given the virtual certainty of Dunne's own constituency seat victory, and with it the waiving of the need to exceed the 5 percent list vote threshold in order to win the party's proportionate share of parliament's seats. The problem, however, was that with little focus on attracting party list votes, United won only 0.9 percent of the nation's party list votes (roughly half its 2.1 percent constituency vote tally), and was allocated no extra list seats. Dunne estimates that if the two tallies had been reversed, United would have realized three seats in the new parliament.

The Alliance was hurt perhaps worst by its assumption that constituency candidate activity would translate into list votes. Wounded both by the

party's pre-election declaration that it would not participate in post-election coalition deals, and by leader Jim Anderton's localized, personal popularity, Alliance candidates, like those from other parties, concluded that they did not have a 'dog's show' of winning through the list. Thus, they focused their energy on winning their constituency seats – Alliance campaign director, Matt McCarten concluding they ran an 'FPP Campaign at the local level' on their way to winning, like United, more constituency votes (11.3 percent) than party list votes (10.1 percent).

All told, then, these reflections help to explain the patterns in 1996 of concerted local-level campaign activity, especially in marginal seats. Candidates in marginal electorates, who were primarily low down on the party list of candidates (higher profile MPs and cabinet ministers having been given top billing in most party lists), feared losing the only contest that might secure them a seat in parliament: their constituency race. The resultant devotion of virtually all of their energies to securing constituency votes in close-run marginal-seats races had the effect of elevating levels of voter exposure to campaign activities, such as receipt of printed materials and telephone calls at the local level. At the other end of the scale, in New Zealand's safe seats, central party mailings designed to secure list votes from voters who were long-used to expecting comfortable victory for the party's candidate, had a comparable effect of boosting voter exposure to campaign appeals. Combined, the first MMP election campaign produced a bimodal pattern of local-level activities that resisted the true blanket-coverage pattern one would expect in an efficiently carried out party list-vote maximizing campaign.

Lessons Learned: The 1999 Election

In the 1999 election, New Zealand's second under MMP, the political lesson most obviously learned by the political parties was the need to signal their post-election coalition intentions. The tortuous 1996 post-election wrangling, and the unexpected National–New Zealand First coalition government it produced, prompted Labour and the Alliance, for example, to construct a detailed coalition covenant, thereby allaying voter uncertainty and their felt need to signal coalition preferences through split ticket votes (see Aimer and Miller, 2002: 12–13). Evidence of political learning in the 1999 election can also be seen in the patterns of parties' campaign activity, which more effectively met the dictates of MMP and list vote maximization. Parties devoted more of their 1999 campaign budgets to the overall campaign, and less to local constituency campaigns for the electorate vote (Vowles, 2002b: 104). At the same time, amongst the constituencies, parties spent more money in closely competitive races than in safe seats – a reminder that candidates who are fearful for their individual survival and motivated by frequently distinct incentives, still have ultimate control of part of the financial resources spent in New Zealand elections.

In the end, however, the 1999 campaign was perhaps most notable for its decline in voter turnout – down to 75 percent, the lowest in any twentieth-century New Zealand election (Vowles, 2002c: 587). Despite the more effective targeting of competitive seats with electorate-level funding (Vowles, 2002d: 104) voter mobilization and turnout remained largely unaffected by campaign spending. This pattern likely reflects parties' more widespread national-level spending. But it is also likely the product of both declining first-hand contact by dwindling numbers of party member volunteers and of voters themselves learning that the list vote is of supreme importance under MMP. Voters in 1999, then, largely ignored parties' electorate-level appeals for their favour (Vowles, 2002d: 104–8), while appearing to respond to cues from parties' overall spending about the viability of the local candidate (see Karp et al., 2002: 13). In this sense, voters in 1999 may well have adjusted better to the logic of MMP than political parties (Vowles, 2002d: 107).

Summary and Conclusion

Thus, as we have seen, electoral change creates significant incentives for political parties, parliamentary elites and candidates to transform their election campaigns to reflect the new competitive logic of securing votes and seats. At the same time, however, a variety of constraints and differential resources confront these political actors as they attempt to respond to these changing imperatives. As a consequence, in times of electoral flux or transition, political parties face organizational and tactical difficulties in waging a new campaign utilizing a strategic calculus foreign to most of those involved and contrary to the interests of some. These tensions are especially evident at the local constituency level, where the influence of the central campaign elite and the party's new strategic agenda has the least sway – frequently resulting in patterns of campaign activities that reflect the old system's logic as well as the new, and that vary in the extent to which the new logic is successfully employed.

This article has illustrated these dynamics at two critical junctures in New Zealand's electoral history. In the first example, as the country underwent significant dealignment in the late 1980s, we saw how Labour's well-funded parliamentary and organizational elite, with a then-compliant party organization, was able to impose from above the strategic, technical and organizational centralization necessary to create a modern campaign designed to maximize votes in key marginal seats, while ignoring the claims for resources and attention by safe seat constituency campaigns. With no such modernizing elite at the helm of the National Party, and hamstrung by depleted finances, National remained wedded to an obsolete, traditional campaign that routinely succumbed to the demands of non-strategic seats, costing them an election it should have won, given a sizeable swing in its favour. Following National's 1987 defeat, however, the growing acknowledgement of the

party's strategic failing resulted in the deposing of the party organization's old guard, and the election of a new leadership committed to implementing National's own modern, centralized, campaign in 1990.

In the second example, New Zealand's 1996 transition from the world of FPP, plurality constituency elections to a two-vote system of proportional representation meant the need, virtually overnight, to abandon whole organizational and tactical sensibilities. While the party elites were aware well before the campaign began of the need to embrace new tactics to maximize party list votes, the first MMP election in 1996 reflected important residues of the FPP mindset in both voters and candidates that impeded the considered pursuit of those votes. Every party encountered significant resistance from local candidates to priority being given to campaigning for party list votes. In some cases this was because low-profile candidates in marginal seats felt their only chance at election was via a constituency victory and not through the list. In the country's safest seats, the historical absence of aggressive campaigning resulted in local cultures of inactivity and lethargy that profoundly dampened attempts by the central party campaign organization to recruit list votes. This forced parties to emphasize campaigning amongst the larger densities of stalwarts in their own safe seats, while ignoring the slimmer pickings in their opponents' safe seats, despite MMP's fundamental logic to pursue list votes everywhere. Together, the patterns of constituency-level activities in the first election campaign under MMP reflected the important influence of inertia amongst the various political actors involved, while it highlighted the differential incentives that motivated their frequently disparate actions. Nonetheless, as with 1990, the 1999 campaign saw signs of adjustment and adaptation, both by the political parties and, perhaps more compellingly, by the voters in response to the strategic imperatives of electoral change. That both were imperfect responses serves as a reminder that the power of uncertainty frequently rivals the willingness to embrace new approaches in the pursuit of political advantage.

These two patterns of campaign change in New Zealand afford important lessons about the competing incentives that crystallize at times of political transition. They serve as reminders that parties – though they aspire to organizational and strategic unity – are not unitary actors, responding as one to the imperatives of adaptation. Rather, their differential responses to uncertainty point to the difficulties of political learning and adjustment, as political actors gauge the relative benefits and costs of change.

Notes

1 'Inertia' in this essay is broadly defined as resistance to change or adaptation. As is shown in detail, this may be the product of wilful resistance, or of uncertainty, ignorance or lack of resources.

2 Details of these four sets of interviews, covering the 1987 campaign, the 1990 campaign, the lead-up to the 1996 campaign and the 1996 campaign, are available upon request from the author via email: Denemark@cyllene.uwa.edu.au
3 New Zealand law has maintained strict limits on constituency-candidate campaign expenditure since 1895 (Harris, 1987: 32–4). After several increases in the 1970s, the cap was set at $5,000 for the 1984 and 1987 elections, then increased to $10,000 for the 1990 and 1993 elections, and finally increased to $20,000 for the 1996, 1999 and 2002 elections (statistics provided by the Chief Electoral Office, Ministry of Justice, Wellington, New Zealand). National-level spending on campaigns remained without limit until 1995, when an overall ceiling of $2.3 million per party was set for combined electorate and national campaign expenditure (Vowles, 2002a: 421).
4 Agranoff argues that electoral uncertainty, caused by erosions in voters' long-term partisan loyalties and their increasing reliance on short-term factors in their decision-making, prompts campaign strategists to embrace 'new politics', or modern campaign techniques in order to secure votes from this new 'more fluid electorate' (1978: 232).
5 Ironically, Labour, after having run a near-perfect modern campaign in 1987, had to abandon virtually all of it in 1990. Having continued in its second term with its unpopular programme of economic reforms, Labour suffered 'internecine war' (McRobie, 1991: 160–1) between its parliamentary wing and party organization, thus shattering its organizational unity and further fuelling voters' already widespread disillusion. This disdain destroyed Labour's financial base and eroded its ranks of party members, thereby precluding extensive polling and canvassing, while the electorate's 9.6 percent uniform swing against Labour made targeting and marginal seats strategies impossible. For a detailed discussion of the 1990 Labour campaign and the limits of modern campaign techniques, see Denemark (1994).
6 Direct quotes and unattributed details of campaign activities in this section derive from in-depth interviews conducted in the months following the October, 1996 New Zealand general election.
7 Direct mail personalized letters were used primarily by parties to appeal predominantly to their own supporters, and included, especially, appeals for voters' party list votes. Both major parties emphasized the need for voters to give the party both the constituency and the party list vote, given the increasingly apparent desire by many voters to split their two votes and 'signal' their preference for coalition partner by assigning one vote to each of their two preferred parties (Denemark, 1997: 12. Also see Banducci et al., 1998; Johnston and Pattie, 1999; and Levine and Roberts, 1998).
8 At the same time, of course, others had lost their seats altogether, and had to focus on the list as the only way to survive as parliamentarians.

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