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Minor parties, employment relations and election 2026: Small actors, significant influence

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Abstract

The 2023 general election in New Zealand saw the formation of a new coalition government – comprised of National, New Zealand First and ACT - that has enacted significant employment relations (ER) policy changes. To a large extent, these changes reflected the coalition agreement that National entered into with ACT, the larger of its coalition partners. Heading into the 2026 election, the two largest and longest-standing parties in parliament (National and Labour) have a combined polling that is historically low, while the minor parties have a correspondingly high level of support. This article looks at the dynamics and decisions of the government formed after the 2023 election, focussing on the ER policy changes implemented during this term of government, the current ER policies and election prospects of each of the minor parties, and what this might mean for the ER policy agenda after the 7 November 2026 election.

Key words: employment relations policy; public policy; New Zealand elections; political parties; coalition government

Introduction

In 2020, on a wave of support for its early handling of the Covid pandemic, the Labour Party was able to form the first ever single party majority government under MMP. Despite this historic victory, the Labour Party saw its vote share almost halved at the 2023 election (from 50 per cent to 27 per cent), where it lost almost half its seats in parliament (from 65 to 34 MPs). Six parties won representation in the 54th Parliament (2023-2026). All minor parties increased their seat total compared to 2020, with New Zealand First returning to parliament after failing to win representation in 2020. As support for minor parties rose, the combined vote share of the two largest parties, Labour and National, fell to just under 65 per cent (Electoral Commission, n.d.), their lowest combined share of the vote since 2002.

Negotiations to form the new government after the 2023 election took place between three parties: National, with 38 per cent of the vote; the ACT Party (hereafter ACT), with 8.6 per cent, and New Zealand First (hereafter NZ First), with 6.1 per cent (Electoral Commission, n.d.) and took more than six weeks to conclude. Tensions in the negotiations may have been raised by ACT, during the election campaign, ruling out being in a Cabinet with NZ First (Pearse, 2023) and,

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reports suggest, by the minor parties' discomfort with National Party leader Christopher Luxon's negotiating style (Edwards, 2023). Surveys showed that only 10 per cent of National Party voters wanted their Party to go into coalition with NZ First, compared with 57 per cent who wanted ACT included in government (Daalder, 2025). The combined National-ACT vote, however, was insufficient for a parliamentary majority.

The three coalition parties are all represented in cabinet, and they all signed up in their coalition agreements to the conventions of cabinet confidentiality and collective responsibility (New Zealand National Party & ACT New Zealand, 2023). The two separate coalition agreements signed in November 2023 bind the parties to pre-agreed policy details, which have shaped the government's policy agenda to a significant extent.

NZ First's coalition agreement with National contains some ER policies, including a commitment to modest increases in the minimum wage each year, increased obligations on work-ready beneficiaries with sanctions for non-compliance, and a range of work-related immigration issues (New Zealand National Party & New Zealand First, 2023). ER was not, however, a major of this deal.

By contrast, ACT's agreement with National places a heavy emphasis on ER policy. It lists specific reforms to fair pay legislation, reform of health and safety laws, the expansion of 90-day trials to firms of all sizes, changes to personal grievance rules, and a confirmation of the status of contractors whose employment resembles that of an employee (New Zealand National Party & ACT New Zealand, 2023). In addition, ACT Deputy Leader, Brooke van Velden, was appointed Minister of Workplace Relations and Safety, giving her significant power to implement the policy agenda agreed to in the Party's coalition agreement. On one issue of pay equity, the government made radical changes that none of its constituent parties had campaigned on, a few scant years after the Equal Pay Amendment Act (2020) had passed through Parliament with the support of National and NZ First (ACT abstained).

ER-related policy changes 2023-2026

The 54th New Zealand Parliament has had a busy ER legislative reform agenda (see, for example, Anderson et al., 2026), largely based on the ACT-National coalition agreement. Table 1 lists ER policy commitments contained in this agreement and the legislation enacting these changes.

Table 1: National-Act parties' coalition agreement commitments and legislative action

Coalition agreement commitment (Source: New Zealand National Party & ACT New Zealand, 2023, page 5).	**Legislation**
"Repeal the Fair Pay Agreement regime by Christmas 2023"	Fair Pay Agreements Act Repeal Act 2023*
"Reform health and safety law and regulations"	Health and Safety at Work Amendment Bill 2026 – comes into effect 1 April 2027
"Expand 90-day trials to apply to all businesses"	Employment Relations (Trial Periods) Amendment Act 2023*
"Consider simplifying personal grievances and in particular removing the eligibility for remedies if the employee is at fault, and setting an income threshold above which a personal grievance could not be pursued"	Employment Relations Amendment Act 2026
"Maintain the status quo that contractors who have explicitly signed up for a contracting arrangement can't challenge their employment status in the Employment Court."	Employment Relations Amendment Act 2026

*Passed under urgency

In addition to law changes, minimum wages have risen, in accordance with NZ First policy, but at a rate below the rate of inflation, effectively giving minimum wage earners a real pay cut (Grey, 2026). The government changed procurement rules, including removing the need for public sector agencies to "pay the living wage in contracts for cleaning, catering and security guard services" (Willis, 2025). Not included in either of the coalition agreements was the removal of diversity and inclusion requirements in public sector hiring policies, through the Public Sector Amendment Bill 2026. Speaking to this bill, ACT MP, Simon Court, invoked some of the anti-DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) rhetoric that had become common in other jurisdictions, stating that: "ACT has long argued that New Zealanders deserve a Public Service based on competence, advancement, and merit, not ideology and not identity politics." Labour MP, Camilla Belich, meanwhile, noted that officials at the Governance and Administration Committee were unable to "point to a single example when a public servant [had] not been appointed on the basis of merit" (NZP, 2026, May 14).

Law changes since 2023 have typically been framed as solving problems, such as an undue "regulatory burden" on employers, complexity and "unclear expectations", inefficiencies and low productivity (van Velden, in NZP, 15 July 2025; van Velden, in NZP, 12 February 2026). Taken as a whole, and unsurprisingly for a right-leaning government in which ACT took a lead role, these changes moved ER policy in the direction of reducing regulation and direct costs for employers.

Table 2 presents a summary of ER-related law changes and how the minor parties voted on them.

Table 2: Major employment relations changes 2023-2026 – How minor parties voted

	ER policy alignment: which major party does the minor party's voting record align with?*	No. MPs	Employment Relations (Trial Periods) Amendment Act 2023	Fair Pay Agreements Act Repeal Act 2023	Equal Pay Amendment Act 2025	Employment Relations (Pay Deductions for Partial Strikes) Amendment Act 2025	Employment Relations Amendment Act 2026	Health and Safety at Work Amendment Bill 2026	Public Service Amendment Bill 2026	Employment Leave Bill 2026
ACT	National	11	Support	Support	Support	Support	Support	Support	Support	Support
NZ First	National	8	Support	Support	Support	Support	Support	Support	Support	Support
Green Party	Labour	15	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose
Te Pāti Māori + independents	Labour	6	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	-**	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose

* See also additional comments and caveats in the text

** Did not vote at the third reading

SOURCE: New Zealand Parliament.

Reform of the trial period legislation allows employers to include a trial period in employment agreements to dismiss new employees without reason within the first 90 days of employment. Introduced in 2009 under the National-led government, the trial-period law first applied solely to small businesses and was broadened in 2011 to include all employers. Labour went to the 2017 election promising to abolish this but, after forming a coalition with NZ First, instead limited their use to businesses employing fewer than 20 staff. The Employment Relations (Trial Periods) Amendment Act 2023, once again, allows businesses of any size to include a trial period in employment agreements (MBIE, 2024).

Fair Pay Agreements enabled sector- or occupation-level bargaining, establishing a minimum floor for pay and conditions across the relevant sector or occupation. Legislation enabling these was passed by the Labour-majority government in 2022, too close to the 2023 election for any agreements to come into force (Skilling & Molineaux, 2023). Their repeal was one of the earliest actions of the new government.

Although pay equity reforms were absent from both coalition agreements and no party campaigned on the issue during the 2023 election, Minister for Workplace Relations and Safety, Brooke van Velden, later confirmed that she had spoken with the Prime Minister about adding it to her work programme shortly after the election (McConnell, 2025a). The work was kept secret to prevent new claims being put into the system or existing claims being delayed before changes were made (McConnell, 2025a). The Equal Pay Amendment Act of 2020, which passed with the support of all parties in Parliament except ACT (who abstained), was repealed on 6 May 2025, with no forward publicity, no consultation, no regulatory impact analysis, no select committee process and limited opportunity for opposition MPs to hold the government to account. Passing through parliament under urgency on a single day, the law discontinued 33 pay equity claims that were in process and tightened the criteria for making claims in the future (McConnell, 2025b).

van Velden said that the repeal "improves the process…[and] provides a better framework for assessing whether there is sex-based undervaluation" arguing that the previous settings had "led to claims being progressed through the entry threshold without strong evidence of undervaluation" (van Velden, in NZP, 6 May 2025). She justified the retrospective nature of the law change and the breach of rights arising from cancelling claims already in progress by arguing that the new law would allow "employers to better manage their operations, reducing potential risks to an employer's financial viability which may lead to a reduction in employment or the quality or quantity of services provided" (Whitton, 2025). This law change meant that over 150,000 mainly low-wage women lost potential pay rises, while the government saved billions of dollars that had been set aside for the future pay equity claims of public sector employees (for example, teachers) and contractors (for example, care workers) (McConnell, 2025b). Budget 2025 estimated the savings to government to be around $12.8 billion dollars (Sachdeva, 2025).

The Health and Safety at Work Amendment Bill was passed in June 2026, after being introduced into Parliament in February of the same year. Minister van Velden said at the Bill's first reading that it "will address longstanding [issues] about complexity, uncertainty,

and overcompliance and contribute to economic growth by cutting red tape and reducing unnecessary costs, particularly for small business" (van Velden in NZP, 12 February 2026).

The Bill amends legislation and regulations including the 2015 Health and Safety at Work Act that was a response to the 2010 Pike River Mine disaster that killed 29 miners (MBIE, 2026). The new legislation narrows the focus from a broad performance-based approach for all firms to one that reduces the obligations for firms with fewer than 20 employees to only manage "critical risk" (MBIE, 2026). Around 90 per cent of businesses that submitted on the Bill in 2026 wanted substantial changes to it or opposed the small business exemptions (Pannett, 2026). Some of those business managers who made a submission, warned that the changes will do the opposite of the Minister's stated intention, arguing that the two-tier system will increase complexity and compliance costs, particularly on worksites with multiple employers of varying sizes (Macfie, 2026). Many submitters also argued that the shift to focussing on "critical risk" will lead to higher rates of workplace injury and fatalities (Pannett, 2026). Lower grade risks currently contribute about half of all workplace injuries costs for the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), and employers not managing these may result in higher ACC levies for firms across the board (Macfie, 2026).

Pike River campaigners presented a petition against the Health and Safety at Work Amendment Bill to NZ First leader, Winston Peters, who had previously called Pike River "a murder scene" (Smith, 2025). Peters said the legislation would "create accidents and deaths" but NZ First voted for it, citing a coalition agreement obligation to do so (Pullar-Stecker, 2026). The implementation date of the legislation was, however, pushed out until 1 April 2027, to accommodate NZ First who would, Peters said, "fix" the legislation after the 2026 election (Pullar-Stecker, 2026). Labour has also promised to repeal it (Pannett, 2026).

Legislation requiring large firms to identify, report on, and address risks of modern slavery within their supply chains, aligning New Zealand with jurisdictions, such as Australia, was introduced and supported in Parliament by National, Labour, NZ First, Te Pāti Māori and the Green Party, leaving ACT alone in its opposition (NZP, 2026, April 29). ACT argued that the Modern Slavery Bill would impose compliance costs on firms but do nothing to reduce slavery. It argued that the Bill would require businesses to monitor complex global supply chains that cannot be fully traced, noting that slavery was already illegal in New Zealand, and described the proposals as "a massive virtue signal" (ACT New Zealand, 2026a).

Prospects for the 2026 election and new government

Most recent political polls have been reported as an electoral contest between a right bloc consisting of the three parties currently in government and a left bloc consisting of the three opposition parties (Labour, the Greens and Te Pāti Māori). Polling in 2026 has suggested that support for the two blocs is close, and while Labour has been out-polling National at some stages of the year, the right bloc has, overall, tended to be slightly ahead (Coughlan & Knox, 2026). Support has shifted *between* parties of the government bloc: at the time of writing, support for National is significantly lower than at election 2023, with support for NZ First and ACT higher. Within the centre-left bloc, support has increased for Labour and for the

Green Party. Some months out from the election there are no two-party combinations that could gain a majority of seats in Parliament, except for a grand coalition between Labour and National – a possibility that has been rejected outright by the leaders of both (Lynch, 2026). Indeed, as discussed further below, some recent polls suggest a situation where neither of the existing three-party blocs could command a majority, with Opportunity (formerly The Opportunities Party, or TOP) emerging as a possible king-maker. Shifts in relative popularity within blocs may well affect the distribution of Cabinet posts and policy leverage in post-election negotiations.

With support for both National and Labour hovering below 30 per cent in many recent polls, it is possible that election 2026 will see the worst ever combined result for the two major parties. Neither of these parties' leaders are particularly popular, and Prime Minister, Christopher Luxon, has faced two separate challenges to his leadership in 2026 (Duncan, 2026). Apart from unpopular leadership, the National-led government has faced tough economic conditions, with a recession in 2024 followed by low economic growth (StatsNZ, 2026a), and the highest number of company liquidations since 2010 (New Zealand Companies Office, 2026). The unemployment rate has risen consistently since 2021 to 5.6 per cent in June 2026, the highest since 2015, with high levels of youth unemployment and underutilisation (StatsNZ, 2026b). Even though high, unemployment numbers have been suppressed by an exodus of New Zealanders to Australia, and people exiting the labour force; labour force participation rates (the denominator in calculating unemployment as a percentage) have fallen since the 2023 election (StatsNZ, 2026c). The impacts on fuel and general price inflation of the United States-Israeli attacks on Iran and the subsequent stand-off over the Strait of Hormuz have exacerbated an already challenging economic context. Some commentators have argued that the government's economic policy choices – which included cancelling or postponing infrastructure projects and reducing the number of public servants - have worsened the economic downturn (Rasmussen 2025; Hickey 2025).

This series of glum macroeconomic indicators would tend to suggest an electoral advantage for opposition parties, but Labour has struggled to gain traction with the public. Polls show that the Party's popularity increased steadily from their 2023 election night result of 27 per cent to the mid-30s in early 2026 before falling back. Leader Chris Hipkins has adopted a "small-target" strategy, releasing minimal and uncontroversial policy to reduce scrutiny and criticism, "while allowing the unpopularity of Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and his government's day-to-day missteps to dominate public attention" (The Post Editorials Leaders Team, 2026). In an MMP environment, minor parties might be expected to take on the role of providing more radical policy ideas, but the Greens and Te Pāti Māori have spent much of the last term dealing with tragedies, scandals and internal party discipline issues, discussed below. Further, when these parties have proposed substantive policy proposals including changes to tax policy settings (see Swarbrick & Davidson, 2026) they have struggled to attract significant coverage.

The existing 'right' and 'left' blocs do not, however, represent the only possible coalition combinations following election 2026. NZ First positions itself as a centrist party offering moderation and balance, and has previously been part of governing arrangements with both National and Labour. Indeed, over the course of our surveys of minor parties and ER

policies going back to the 2011 election, this is the first time we have classified NZ First as more closely aligned with National than with Labour (see Table 2). While this history demonstrates the capacity of NZ First and Labour to co-operate on a range of policy issues, prospects for a formal relationship after 2026 appear slim. As we noted in 2014, potential deals between parties are informed not just by alignment on policy issues, but also by less predictable factors, such as the personal relationships of key actors (Molineaux & Skilling, 2014). In recent years, Winston Peters has sought to distance himself from his involvement in the Labour-led government's response to the Covid pandemic, accusing Chris Hipkins of lying to him during this period. In 2025, Peters (cited in Coughlan, 2025) stated that "when I ruled out Hipkins in 2023, I ruled him out permanently". Hipkins has similarly stated, "I'm happy to rule [Peters] out. It's clearly not going to happen" (Dexter, 2026).

Beyond the parties currently in parliament, multiple polls in mid-2026 have put Opportunity - a party that has not previously won parliamentary representation - close to or above the five per cent threshold for entering parliament. Opportunity positions itself as a centrist party that "would be happy to go into a coalition with National or Labour" (Smith, 2026), repeating that stance even after Luxon ruled out working with them (1News, 2025).

Regardless of whether the next government is headed by National or Labour, the ability of minor parties to exert influence on ER policies of that government depends on a range of factors, including the *power* that each party can exert in negotiations, their *positions* on key policy issues, and the *priority* that they give to ER policy. We discuss these dimensions for each party in the next section, which profiles all minor parties with a realistic chance of being elected to the New Zealand parliament following election 2026.

Party Profiles

ACT Party

History and overview of principles and values

Founded in 1993, the ACT (or Association of Consumers and Taxpayers) Party has the stated purpose of "implement[ing] better policy … through reducing the role of government and increasing the role of free markets" (ACT 2022, p.3). Its emphasis on (and specific interpretation of) individual freedom and responsibility leads it to hold that "voluntary choice and agreement should be the way in which people deal with each other in everyday life and in the economic market place" (ACT 2022, p.4). In the realm of ER policy, this classical liberal position is expressed through the Party's opposition to collective bargaining processes, its wariness of state regulation, and its support for flexibility and voluntary choice in the ER arena.

Current and potential degree of power

Having existed for three electoral terms (from 2010 to 2020) as a one-MP party, ACT's electoral success increased markedly at the 2020 election (7.6 per cent of the party vote, 10 MPs) and then again in 2023 (8.6 per cent, 11 MPs). ACT's electoral result in 2023 granted not just more MPs, but also more resources, speaking rights in debates, and places on select committees. ACT Party list MP, Parmjeet Parmar, is currently a member of the Education and Workforce Select Committee, along with three National MPs, giving the coalition a 5-4 majority over the three Labour and one Green Party MPs on the committee (New Zealand Parliament, n.d.).

ACT's position after the 2023 election was strengthened further by the National Party's relatively poor result. National attracted only 38.1 per cent of the party vote (48 MPs), meaning that it required the support of both ACT and NZ First to form a government. ACT's support has increased since the election, with a recent poll of polls placing it at 9 per cent, similar to NZ First, with National below 30 per cent (Daalder, 2026a). If ACT is again involved in forming a government after the 2026 election, it seems likely that governing arrangements will again require at least three parties, with ACT, NZ First and (potentially) Opportunity in positions to wield significant influence over the government's policy programme. As such, it is important to understand ACT's position on ER issues, and the priority that it would likely give to these issues.

Position on ER policy

In our previous surveys of the ER policy positions of minor parties, we have typically spoken of whether such parties support the positions of their larger coalition partners. It is less clear whether the relevant question is if ACT has supported National's agenda since 2023, or whether ACT has more actively shaped the government's ER agenda. ACT's list of priorities in ER policy is developed in more detail than National's in their coalition agreements, and all of ACT's stated priorities were developed and passed. Specific policy agreements (see Table 1) were all met. As Minister of Workplace Relations and Safety, ACT co-leader Brooke van Velden introduced most of the legislation listed in Table 2. In her ministerial role, van Velden typically took the first call to introduce, explain and defend ER legislation in parliamentary debates, playing a key role in shaping how these debates unfolded.

van Velden has certainly been an active and determined advocate for the Party's policy, sometimes to an extent that has drawn procedural criticism. Based on the claim that "too many [Employment Relations Authority (ERA)] members had solely public sector experience" and that "they may believe that money grows on trees", van Velden appointed four new members to the ERA (Pearse, 2025). Her comments were criticised by the Public Service Association as an "outrageous breach of judicial independence", and van Velden was reminded by Attorney-General, Judith Collins, about the importance of "maintaining the independence of the [ERA]" (Pearse, 2025).

Van Velden typically presented the policy changes she advocated as advancing core values such as flexibility, business efficiency and individual freedom. For example, she opposed (in

NZP, 2023, December 12) "fair pay agreements [that] required all employers within the coverage to offer the same minimum terms and conditions" in a "rigid, one-size-fits-all agreement" since "businesses need … flexibility" and should retain the "fundamental right to freedom of association, which includes the freedom to not associate." Similarly (in NZP, 2025, July 15) she endorsed the Employment Relations Amendment Bill on the grounds that it would enhance "labour market flexibility [and] reduce … compliance costs."

Van Velden was careful, however, to argue that these changes enhanced not just efficiency and competitiveness for firms, but also opportunities and conditions for workers, and economic outcomes for the country as a whole. "The best and the most sustainable way to increase the wages of workers and to lower prices for consumers", she said (in NZP, 2023, December 12), "is to improve productivity and reduce the regulations holding businesses back". Similarly, she claimed that the wider availability of 90-day trials "will help employees and help their families and help all of New Zealand" (in NZP, 2021, December 19). Holding that the "[u]ncertainty and unreasonable costs" associated with the policies of the previous government served to "discourage investment and hiring", van Velden argued that "when businesses thrive, our economy thrives, and it's only with a strong economy that we can lift wages, create opportunities, and help Kiwis get ahead" (in NZP, 2025, July 15).

Likely priorities after the 2026 election

Employment relations has been a major policy priority for ACT over the past three years, and the Party has achieved its ER policy objectives as listed in its coalition agreement with National (Table 1). Van Velden is retiring from parliament at the 2026 election, and it is not clear who will replace her or, indeed, whether ACT will press to keep the Workplace Relations and Safety portfolio. ACT is keen to emphasise the role it has played in driving change as part of "the most business-friendly Government in a generation" (ACT New Zealand, 2026b), and its 2026 employment-related policies are part of the "Backing Small Business" policy for the 2026 election (ACT New Zealand, 2026c). New policies include freezing the minimum wage, introducing a training wage for under 20-year-olds that is substantially lower than the current starting-out minimum wage, making to easier to end employment, shortening the time period for lodging personal grievances with the Employment Relations Authority and making payroll deductions for union fees voluntary (ACT New Zealand, 2026b). Building on welfare sanctions that the coalition government implemented following the 2023 election (Cochrane et al. 2026), ACT is proposing further restrictions on benefit eligibility, saying they wish to "restore fairness, personal responsibility, and the value of work to New Zealand's benefit system" with jobs being filled by locals rather than migrants (Seymour, 2026). This policy includes stricter medical assessments for health-related benefits.

The Green Party

History and overview of principles and values

Emerging from the Values Party, the Green Party was established in 1990 and has always prioritised issues of social justice alongside environmental concerns, understanding society as constituted by power relations and conflicts between blocs. In the realm of ER policy, this understanding of society leads the Party to promote workers' rights against what it sees as the overwhelming power of employers. During the last term, Green Party Workplace Relations and Safety spokesperson, Teanau Tuiono, insisted that workers must have "a basic right to seek remedies for unjustifiable and unlawful dismissal" and held that the coalition government's Employment Rights Amendment Act "effectively destroys that right, leaving workers completely exposed to abuses of power by their employers" (Tuiono, 2026). Instead of "protecting and supporting" workers, Tuiono continued, "this Government is in the pockets of multinational corporates, delivering on their every whim."

Against ACT's commitment to a worldview of individuals exercising their rights and freedoms, the Greens' analysis focusses on groups and blocs within society, differentiated by their power positions. Party co-leader, Marama Davidson, for example, stressed the importance of Fair Pay Agreements in addressing "the particular inequities, including for those industries and sectors that are overrepresented by Māori and by Pasifika and by women and by young people and by disabled people and others" (in NZP, 2023, December 12). And against the government's fixation on overall economic growth ("[a]ll we get is this kōrero all about 'Growth, growth, growth'") the Greens' analysis asks how the benefits and burdens of that growth are shared: "What about the growth and pride for the workers? What about growth and pride for the work that these people actually do for us?" (Tuiono, in NZP, 2025, June 24). The Green Party, thus, stands against the idea that deregulation, voluntary agreements and 'flexibility' benefit everyone. Instead, they insist that regulation and the power of the state is necessary to counteract the inequalities that exist between employers and workers.

Current and potential degree of power

In 2023, the Greens received 11.6 per cent of the vote and 15 MPs, including three electorate MPs. This was a marked improvement from their results in 2017 and 2020 (eight and 10 MPs respectively) but broadly in line with those from the 2011 and 2014 election (14 MPs at both). Six weeks out from the election, the Greens were polling strongly, on track for a record result. A late September poll had them on 16 per cent (Daalder, 2026a).

It has been a challenging term for the Party, with former co-leader, James Shaw, retiring from politics, new MP, Fa'anānā Efeso Collons, dying in office, another (Benjamin Doyle) resigning, citing "concerns for their safety and the wellbeing of their whānau" amid a police investigation into threats against them (McConnell, 2025c), and two others resigning (Golriz Ghahraman) or being removed (Darleen Tana) from parliament following allegations of illegal behaviour (RNZ 2024a; 2024b). Co-leader Marama Davidson took a leave of absence from parliament following a cancer diagnosis in June 2024, returning in February 2025

following treatment. Strong polling closer to the election may be partially a response to the relatively weak performance of the Labour Party, which seemed stuck below 30 per cent (Daalder 2026a), along with media coverage focusing on policy rather than personnel issues.

Position on ER policy

The Greens' stance on ER policy has not changed since previous elections. In response to the speed and direction of travel of ER policy under the coalition government, the Party's response has been consistent and forthright. Speaking in response to the Employment Relations Amendment Bill, spokesperson, Teanau Tuiono, (in NZP, 2026, February 17) described it as "a terrible, terrible bill" that represented "a dark day for Aotearoa and a dark day for the workers". Tuiono went further, describing the Bill as part of a broader and deliberate pattern. It was, he said,

> …another example of a horrible, rubbish bill coming through this Parliament against the context of a whole lot of rubbish bills—anti-worker bills. We've seen it across this parliamentary term, whether it's the cancelling of pay equity claims, bringing back 90-day trials, getting rid of fair pay agreements.

Elsewhere (in response to the Employment Relations (Pay Deductions for Partial Strikes) Amendment Bill) Tuiono (in NZP, 2025, June 24) repeated this theme, arguing that "what we have seen over the parliamentary term is an attack on workers' rights" and "an ongoing onslaught".

In their consistent opposition to the ER agenda of the coalition government, the Green Party repeatedly positioned that agenda as ideological and as ignoring evidence. MP Ricardo Menéndez March (in NZP, 2023, December 12) held that the repeal of the Fair Pay Agreements Act was based entirely on the government's belief that "trickle-down economics will deliver change for the workers". He noted that "there was no — absolutely no — mention of evidence to back up this repeal", that it was "vibes-based politics" and that the "Minister [van Velden] should be ashamed that she has been unable to substantiate the arguments". On a separate occasion – during debates on the Employment Relations (Trial Periods) Amendment Bill – Menéndez March (in NZP, 2023, December 19) advised the Minister van Velden to "go back to her coalition document, which … claims that they will be looking at data and evidence when it comes to decision making, because this bill has no evidential basis."

The Greens argued that the government's agenda was not just ideological but also driven by the interests of big business. In the context of a court decision upholding Uber drivers' right to be considered employees rather than contractors, Tuiono described the government's drafting of the Employment Relations Amendment Bill, which "defines a statutory class of worker, the 'specified contractor'" and then shuts "this new category of worker ... out of employment protections" as having been "basically just cut and pasted ... from their buddies at Uber" (Tuiono, in NZP, 2026, February 17). Similarly, Menéndez March (in NZP, 2026, February 17) argued that "the people who hold our economy together are not

the shareholders, not the CEOs, certainly not the tobacco and fossil fuel CEOs that this Government cosies up to" but rather the "everyday people, who currently, under this Government, are struggling" due to "an increased cost of living and diminishing rights for workers".

The Party's 2026 Manifesto promises to "protect rights, improve conditions and make things fairer for workers" by (1) "changing employment law to default union membership", (2) protecting "workers' free time with a right to disconnect", (3) exploring putting "representatives on boards of publicly listed companies", (4) ensuring "annual minimum wage increases that at least keep up with inflation" and eventually "matching the minimum wage to the living wage", (5) increasing "paid parental leave to 15 months for the primary caregiver", (6) "strengthening the test for whether a worker is a contractor" and (7) closing "gender and ethnic pay gaps" by resuming claim negotiations and mandating "comprehensive pay gap reporting" (Green Party, 2026, p.42).

Likely priorities after the 2026 election

The power of the Greens to influence policy is largely dependent on the election result and the eventual shape of the government after the election. While the Greens have historically worked with National to advance specific policy objectives including home insulation and energy efficiency (Key, 2009), there appears to be little (if any) common ground with National on ER policy, especially if National continues to be dependent on the support of ACT. There is a greater alignment between the Greens and Labour on ER policy than in other areas, such as tax and welfare. The Party faces the ongoing question of whether its policy objectives are better served by entering into coalition (and, thus, being tied closely to decisions driven by Labour that might alienate the Greens' activist base) or by staying outside of formal coalition, thus, maintaining greater independence and freedom, but with potentially less scope to secure policy "wins".

New Zealand First

History and overview of principles and values

NZ First promotes itself as representing a moderate, sensible position between the extremes of the left and the right of New Zealand politics. They claim that "an ideology of extremism leads to policies for the few which is why pragmatism and balanced decision making from the centre is needed to provide the best policies for all" (New Zealand First, 2026a). In practice, this means that they often appear to act as an opposition party even when they are part of a governing arrangement. During their coalition arrangement with Labour in the 2020-2023 term, New Zealand First "acted as a handbrake" on policy changes Labour had campaigned on, such as a capital gains tax (Trevett, 2020), and, in the ER space, Fair Pay Agreements (Young, 2022). This term, NZ First has supported the major pieces of ER legislation, citing coalition agreement commitments, but have promised to revisit health and safety law reforms after the election (Gabel, 2026). While continuing to support universal superannuation, New Zealand First claim imposing stricter conditions on other

beneficiaries as one of their achievements, along with promoting regional development as a means of supporting employment opportunities (New Zealand First, 2026b).

The Party has consistently stressed the theme of balance and moderation during this parliamentary term. For example, ER spokesperson, Mark Patterson, (in NZP, 2023, December 12) said that the Party "has always taken a very balanced view on employment relations" and that this had included a commitment to increases in the minimum wage. Despite this emphasis on increased wages, the Party supported repealing the Fair Pay Act legislation because "the issue around that balance is that you have to have someone that's prepared to employ you" (in NZP, 2023, December 12). Supporting that Employment Relations (Pay Deductions for Partial Strikes) Amendment Act, Patterson said that "New Zealand First always approach these issues of employment relations with a view to getting fairness and balance" and they supported the legislation on the basis of a belief that it was "seeking to address a genuine imbalance" (in NZP, 2025, June 24).

Current and potential degree of power

Having received 2.6 per cent of the vote and no seats in parliament at the (albeit unusual) 2020 election, NZ First rebounded in 2023 to something close to its historical average: 6.1 per cent and eight seats, all of which were list seats, with the Party failing to win an electorate. As noted above, the post-election maths meant that National required the support of both ACT and NZ First in order to govern. In one sense, NZ First's decision to enter a coalition with National was predictable, given that leader Winston Peters had, prior to the election, "ruled out working with a Labour government" (Skilling & Molineaux, 2023). On the other hand, ACT had ruled out "working with New Zealand First if the party [was] given Cabinet positions" (Pearse, 2023), and NZ First has, famously, been punished at every previous election where it has been a formal part of governing arrangements in the preceding parliamentary term. This time around, however, Peters appears to have mastered the art of acting as an opposition politician while simultaneously being in government or, as Oldfield (2024) puts it, being "an insider speaking to an outsider demographic" (p.264).

Peters has explicitly ruled out working with "Labour or their Marxist and separatist mates" after the 2026 election, representing "the left [as] full of woke, self-confessed communists who would turn our country into a basket case" (Ensor, 2026) and dismissing a reporter's question about a possible deal with Labour as a "wanker question" (Hu, 2026). The National Party, however, has continued to raise the spectre of NZ First supporting a Labour-led government, as they did after the 2017 election, with Deputy Leader, Nicola Willis, arguing it to be a "live risk … that they'll get into bed with Hipkins, Swarbrick, the Greens" (New Zealand Herald, 2026a). Labour, for their part, have ruled out a possible post-election arrangement (Dexter, 2026).

Position on ER policy

There has been little evidence over the past three years that ER policy has been the Party's chief priority. Their spokesperson on ER issues is Mark Patterson, but his contributions to

the debates on ER legislation have not suggested a deep engagement with the issues. Supporting the Employment Relations Amendment Bill (2026) at the First Reading, Patterson said that "[w]e believe the Minister is bringing in sensible changes. New Zealand First is always a champion of labour market flexibility" (in NZP, 2025, July 15). But by the time of the Third Reading, while he thought that the legislation would support "all those good things that we know we have to do as a country", he had "become more aware of the concerns around this bill" and promised that if it "does not work as has been sold to us on the tin, we will certainly be watching" (in NZP, 2026, February 17).

It is hard to find a well-articulated statement of NZ First's position or a particular emphasis on ER policy for 2026. The relevant section on the Party's 2023 website was "Immigration and Employment", where the link lies in this somewhat ungrammatical construction: "[t]hrough greater focus on and investment in both local and nationwide skills needs minimise the importation of labour." As well as committing to the expansion of the "90-day trial programme" to more businesses, NZ First promised greater support for careers advice, apprenticeships, job transitions, and opportunities for "differently abled" and senior workers. Elsewhere, under the heading of "A New Zealand with Employment Opportunity", the Party promised to examine "the feasibility of lifting the adult Minimum Wage to at least $25 an hour by allowing businesses a tax concession to do so", limiting "the lifetime entitlement for the JobSeeker WorkReady benefit" to two years, and offering "[f]ree apprenticeships for in-demand vocations." (New Zealand First, n.d.).

These areas of focus were reflected in NZ First's coalition agreement with National (New Zealand National Party & New Zealand First, 2023), which set out its commitment to "[s]trengthen obligations on Jobseeker WorkReady beneficiaries to find work and make use of sanctions for non-compliance with work obligations, and consider time limits for under 25s" and to provide "moderate increases to the minimum wage every year". While the Party accepted that some immigration would be necessary to fill "genuine workforce needs", they also insisted on improved planning and "risk management" to provide appropriate "focus" to the immigration system (pp. 4-5).

Overall, though, the coalition agreement contained relatively little focus on ER issues, leaning more heavily towards what might be termed 'culture war' issues. Peters has increasingly channelled political language that appears directly imported from MAGA Republicans in the United States. In his 2025 State of the Nation Address, he announced a "war on woke", claiming that "[o]ne of the most concerning and insidious cancers in our society today is the underlying creep of woke social engineering" (RNZ Digital Reports, 2025). During the 2023 election campaign, the Party effectively courted the 'freedom' constituency opposed to Covid mandates and vaccinations, and several micro parties saw their potential voters turn to NZ First (Oldfield et al., 2025).

Likely priorities after the 2026 election

As a self-identified party of balance and moderation, NZ First is unlikely to argue for further deregulation in ER policy. Indeed, the party has signalled that, despite being bound by its coalition agreement to support the legislation this term, it would "make getting rid of [the

Health and Safety at Work] legislation a priority" after the 2026 election (Gabel, 2026). Further, it has undertaken to keep a watching brief on how other legislation, it has supported, operates in practice. These ambivalent positions on parts of the government's ER agenda exemplify the sometimes-tense relations between the three governing parties. These tensions have, if anything, become more acute as the parliamentary term transitions into the election campaign (Ketels,2026).

Te Pāti Māori

History and overview of principles and values

Te Pāti Māori (TPM) emerged at the 2020 election as a Te Tiriti (Treaty-led) and tino rangatiratanga (Māori self-determination) focussed party, a more radical proposition than the earlier, more "pragmatic" and moderate Māori Party. This change in approach was a response to a chastening election result in 2017, where the Māori Party won no seats as voters punished it for its involvement in a succession of National Party-led governing arrangements (Godfery, 2018). While the earlier iteration of the Māori Party had been happy to work with the National Party if that was necessary to have a seat at the decision-making table and "get wins for our people" (Sharples, cited in Tahana, 2015), the contemporary TPM has tried to more fundamentally shape the political agenda around constitutional and systemic reform. It sometimes seems to operate more as an activist social movement than a conventional small party. They have challenged parliamentary rules as well as government policy and called for extra-parliamentary protest actions.

Current and potential degree of power

Te Pāti Māori won three per cent of the vote at the 2023 election but won six out of the seven Māori electorates, creating an overhang in what has been a 123-seat parliament. On the numbers, this seemed to continue a recovery for the Party, which was absent from parliament after the 2017 election, and then won 1.2% of the vote and two seats in 2020. Much of the current parliamentary term, however, has been challenging for the Party. The last three years have been marked by court cases, internal tensions and tragedy. The Party was accused of using data collected as part of the census and vaccination operations to assist its campaigning (Brettkelly, 2024), resulting in multiple investigations by bodies including the Serious Fraud Office, the Privacy Commissioner, and the Public Services Commissioner (1News, 2025).

Te Pāti Māori lost two MPs to 'independent MP' status following very public internal disputes over leadership issues (Rātana, 2026). The Party was also rocked by the sudden death of MP Takutai Tarsh Kemp in 2025. She was replaced in parliament by Oriini Kapiara, who won the resulting by-election in a landslide (Electoral Commission, 2025).

Position on ER policy

Employment relations policy has not been a priority for TPM this term, but they have voted against all of the policy changes put forward by the government and argued passionately that these reforms will harm ordinary people. In the past, the Party has called for a living wage for all workers, higher taxes on wealth, and the elimination of consumption tax (GST). In line with the Greens, TPM emphasises the power asymmetries between employers and workers, and especially the vulnerability of Māori, Pasifika and migrant workers. Speaking in response to the Employment Relations Amendment Bill in 2026, co-leader Debbie Ngarewa Packer (in NZP, 2025, July 15) held that the bill would "remove every protection that has entrenched equality [and give] employers more power", creating an "opportunity for employers to exploit the most vulnerable." For Ngarewa-Packer, this is part of a pattern where the coalition "Government has been about … exploiting those who need support the most" (in NZP, 2025, July 15).

Along similar lines, TPM MP (now an independent) Tākuta Ferris (in NZP, 2023, December 19) argued that the Employment Relations (Trial Periods) Amendment Act 2023, would "allow employers to fire their workers with absolute impunity, treating people as products that can be discarded and repurchased every 90 days". This, he said, demonstrated a total ignorance of "the historical impacts and ramifications of policies like this one on to iwi Māori" and a "blatant disregard of the Government's obligation to provide active protection in all areas, including economic activity, for their Tiriti partner." Further, in speaking to the first reading of the Employment Leave Bill, which reduces leave entitlements for workers not in standard work, TPM MP, Oriini Kaipara, (in NZP, 2026, March 12) argued that the "Government says it wants efficiency", but that "efficiency without justice is exploitation. Workers are not just entries in a payroll system. They are parents. They are aunties, uncles, caregivers, nieces, nephews, community leaders—the foundation of our economy."

Likely priorities after the 2026 election

With polling suggesting that Labour and the Green Party together will not be able to form a two-party government, TPM is often included by commentators as part of a left-wing alternative government bloc. While a Labour-led government may need the support of TPM after the 2026 election, Labour is expected to fight hard in the Māori electorates to deprive TPM of a return (Daalder, 2026b). TPM has announced an electorate only vote campaign – a one-tick campaign – to engineer a parliamentary overhang, which would increase the likelihood of a change of government (Natanahira, 2026). Polling in Māori electorates – which are mostly huge geographic constituencies with low turnout, is notoriously inaccurate.

While ER policy is not a high priority for TPM, they are likely to support proposals to rebalance policy settings towards workers' interests and away from greater employer flexibility.

Opportunity

History and overview of principles and values

The Opportunity Party (previously TOP) was founded in 2016 and positions itself as a centrist party advancing evidence-based policy. It describes its candidates as a "new generation of politicians … free from ideological and party baggage … who can work constructively with the 'left' and 'right' sides of politics" (Opportunity, 2026a). Since 2016, it has undergone several leadership changes and rebrands. Its support in general elections has ranged from 1.5 per cent in 2020 to just over two per cent in both 2017 and 2023. In 2026, however, it began consistently polling close enough to the five per cent threshold for media to cover it as a serious contender for parliamentary representation (Daalder, 2026a). Under MMP, a party needs to win an electorate – a strategy that failed for TOP in 2023 when they targeted the Ilam electorate in Christchurch – or secure five per cent of the party vote.

Opportunity's brand is based on proposing policy solutions offering systemic change rather than incremental changes to existing arrangements. It remains unclear how effectively it will be able to advance its more radical proposals (including a universal basic income [UBI] and major tax reforms including a land tax) through the realities of working within a coalition government with much larger partners. The Party's website currently contains no explicit ER policies, but its policies around tax and welfare reform, student loan interest forgiveness, and incentives to boost research and development will clearly impact on outcomes for business and for workers (Opportunity, 2026b). Opportunity's rise in polls during mid-2026 is likely to prompt a greater degree of critical commentary from the media and other parties in the run-up to the election, with the Editor-in-Chief of *The Post* promising the party that they will face "the toughest scrutiny of their lives" (Hooton, 2026).

Strategically, Opportunity is positioning itself as a centrist party, perhaps as a replacement for NZ First, that would support whichever party emerged from the election with the largest share of the vote (Dirga, 2026), including an openness to supporting National (Smith, 2026) and to working with NZ First (1News, 2026). Given the historically low levels of support for the major parties, there may be disenchanted voters in the centre to attract. Policy-wise, the Party sits somewhat closer to the left than the right, and with a strong environmental policy focus. However, any policy influence would depend on whether it held the balance of power and which of their policies were acceptable to other governing parties in negotiations. Leader, Qiulae Wong, has noted the option of entering into a confidence-and-supply arrangement with the next government rather than a formal coalition, "if it means we can stay true to who we are" (New Zealand Herald, 2026b).

If they make it into parliament, Opportunity will be the first party in the MMP era to do so after being built from the ground up rather than emerging as a breakaway from an existing party. Although several new parties have previously polled at around the four per cent mark, none has translated that level of support into parliamentary representation.

Conclusion

In recent decades, ER policy in New Zealand has followed a yo-yo pattern, with changes of government bringing the repeal of reforms introduced by their predecessors (Skilling, 2019). Labour has indicated it will not simply reverse the current government's policies wholesale (Sands, 2025), although it has committed to reversing some ER reforms. Labour, the Greens, TPM and, to a lesser extent, NZ First broadly support shifting power from employers to workers, with Labour and the Greens likely to prioritise this agenda.

If the current governing arrangement continues after the 2026 election, the direction of ER policy will depend on several variables, including the priority each party assigns to ER relative to other policy goals. ACT drove major changes in the ER portfolio in the 2023 term, and it is yet to be seen how important the resignation of ACT MP, Brooke van Velden, will be to that Party's policy priorities. Another important factor will be the distribution of power among coalition parties. On current polling, this is likely to change. If National returns with fewer MPs while ACT and NZ First gain, the minor parties will have the leverage to demand greater policy influence. Traditional MMP coalition negotiations have centred the major party, but 2026 may mark a departure from this norm. Increasing tensions between leaders Luxon (National) and Peters (NZ First) further complicate possible post-election arrangements, highlighting the role of personal relationships in politics. The Opportunity Party remains a wildcard.

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