

# Breaking the Binary: The New Zealand National Party and Strategic Populism for Elite Ends

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## Abstract

Globally, political parties across the ideological spectrum have attempted to frame themselves as representatives of everyday citizens. In both the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA), the rise of populist and more openly nationalist politicians on the centre-right has led to electoral success. The rhetoric of this populist politics is premised on their supposed reclamation of a national people-centred politics from a corrupt elite. While the political discourse of the centre-right in Aotearoa New Zealand makes much use of the concept of 'everyday'-ness, it is fundamentally different from the anti-elite expressions of the new right in the USA and UK. The New Zealand National Party's use of the term everyday New Zealanders is purposefully fluid; in their discourse, they equate the everyday or ordinary with bourgeoisie and neoliberal values. The expressions of the everyday Kiwi by the centre-right is aimed at the confusion of a national politics with a class-based one. This involves the attempted association of what it means to be a New Zealander with the ownership of property and businesses. The evocation of the everyday and 'Kiwi way of life' comes to serve an ideological function for those who would use populist-lite rhetoric for elite ends. Analysis of this type of political style is an under-researched area in Aotearoa New Zealand politics and constitutes an increasingly important form of claim-making in contemporary politics, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and other comparative countries.

**Keywords:** Aotearoa; New Zealand National Party; nationalism; sociology of everyday; populism

Populists across the world have thrived on framing themselves against the idea of an economic, cultural and political elite operating in concert with one another against the interests of the population at large. Donald Trump and those who campaigned for Brexit both readily tapped into and exacerbated a cultural backlash against elites (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). While theoretical debates over what constitutes populism are far from settled, there is a convergence in the literature on the idea of a populist being someone who uses a political antagonism between 'the people' and an elite who would suppress the will of said people. Populists often make claims to recognise the 'everyday' or 'normal person' in the state they are a part of. This is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of populism. Within Aotearoa New Zealand and its comparator countries,<sup>1</sup> there has been intense competition across political parties to make claims about being the representatives of 'the people' or enactors of the general public's will. Nationalists, who are often populists, will use the ordinary as a stand-in for a national character. What this imagined national character looks like is a much better reflection of the beliefs of whoever is doing the imagining than it is of any actual everyday person. In the term's deployment by the New Zealand National Party,<sup>2</sup> an everyday citizen of the nation becomes associated with ownership of homes and businesses, with a narrow conservative vision of politics.

Aotearoa New Zealand's party politics have had comparatively less populist politics than the more highly polarised United States of America (USA) and United Kingdom (UK) (Curtin & Vowles, 2020). The

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<sup>1</sup> For this article I will use comparator liberal democracy countries to mean Australia, Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. These countries are used as reference points due to their institutional, historical and cultural similarities.

<sup>2</sup> The New Zealand National Party was formed in 1936 as the union of the Reform and United parties, New Zealand's two conservative parties, with the aim of uniting both rural and urban concerns. The party formed following the landslide victory of the Labour Party in 1935 which led to Michael Joseph Savage becoming prime minister (James, 2020). The party was last in government between 2008 and 2017. They typically campaign on a pro-business and fiscally conservative platform.

tone of Aotearoa New Zealand's politics has been different from other countries that it is typically compared with. I argue that Aotearoa New Zealand has not seen a broad rise in overt nationalist or exclusionary populist politics since 2016, a watershed year in the politics of both the UK (Brexit) and USA (the election of Trump). However, there has been an ongoing competition to represent the 'everyday Kiwi' from multiple parties in Aotearoa New Zealand. This article pays particular attention to the approach by the New Zealand National Party and their claim over the imagining of the everyday citizen from the vantage point of the centre-right.

There are now a multitude of studies analysing the drivers of populism, associated phenomena and often-cited causes: polarisation and democratic dissatisfaction (Berman & Kundnani, 2021; Foa et al., 2020; Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020). Too little attention has been paid to how the construction and competition over imagined everyday subjects might be undertaken by actors who are not typically populists. Or how supposedly technocratic parties strategically use populist rhetoric in Aotearoa New Zealand. One of the main corrections needed in the discussion of populism in Aotearoa New Zealand, then, is a qualitative exploration of how neoliberal and populist subject formation can supplement one another through reference to the nation.

Taking inspiration from discursive analyses of populism (Katsambekis, 2020; Laclau, 2005) which start from the question of how a people are constructed by populists, this article builds on arguments made by Sören Brandes (2019) about how advocates of neoliberalism work to construct popular legitimacy for their projects rather than just introduce them by stealth. The National Party has continually made use of a type of appeal to a notion of the everyday New Zealander (or Kiwi) to increase its broad appeal and shore up the party's political support. Rather than explicitly positioning the party in opposition to a set of corrupt elites working against Aotearoa New Zealand's national interest, the party has instead used a purposefully vague and undefined idea of the nation as a way to conflate national interest with the interests of the property- and business-owning classes. To trace this strategy, I have focused on major speeches given by John Key, the last elected National Prime Minister at time of writing, as well as other seminal moments in recent political debates where this strategy has become overt.

## Methods

Unlike New Zealand First, a political party with a more consistently populist tone, the National Party typically frame themselves closer to technocratic pro-rural and pro-business rhetoric and ideology. To understand the use of populism for elite ends, I have focused on those instances where leaders of the National Party have been more explicit in making populist claims. I am not suggesting that this strategy is consistently at play by the National Party, or that the party is defined by this approach. Rather, I suggest it is a specific strategy the party is able to draw upon when it engages with political issues that touch on questions of the nation's relationship between politics and culture. While not omnipresent, it is common and distinct enough to warrant sociological analysis.

The National Party's use of populist rhetoric while maintaining a distance from populist policies can be thought of as 'populism lite'. The often technocratic and pro-market policies associated with the party are justified and vernacularised through a process of appealing to an imagined Kiwi subject. I understand this as a type of strategy in the sense that De Certeau uses that term. For De Certeau, *strategy* can be understood as "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject can be isolated" (De Certeau, 1984, pp. 35–36). This is in contrast to De Certeau's use of *tactics* which he associates with the "polemology of the 'weak'" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 39). As the intention of this article is to draw out the contours of this particular type of strategy, rather than give a definite account of all its uses, it will be possible to find examples of this not mentioned here by the National Party

and by other parties also. This strategy also waxes and wanes depending on political circumstance and the party's leaders.

To present this strategy, I have read through major speeches made by former Prime Minister John Key (Key, 2007a, 2007b) during his time as leader of the National Party, as Key often relied on the blurring of national and class interests as part of his brand of politics, a key part of the populism lite that National utilises. The speeches I have drawn on are from the period between 2007 and 2017. These have been sourced from Radio New Zealand (RNZ), the *New Zealand Herald*, TVNZ's 1News and *Stuff*, and corroborated with the Beehive's website collection of speeches by prime ministers.

This paper does not attempt a complete discursive analysis of the speeches of John Key or the National Party leadership; instead, speeches that focus on themes of national identity have been selected and read. The strategy outlined here is one among many and best seen in moments of reflection on the themes of nationhood in Aotearoa New Zealand. I have also given some attention to examples of this strategy from other leaders of the National Party who have used this style of rhetoric since the party has been in opposition following the 2017 election. These news stories and their subsequent discussion online have shown both the strategy of the National Party and tactics of those who would speak back to them. This is especially true of former leader of the party Simon Bridges' opposition to the capital gains tax on account of it being against the "Kiwi way of life" (Bridges, 2019)

I will demonstrate how the use of terms such as the Kiwi way serves an ideological function and works towards a form of subject construction in Aotearoa New Zealand. The reading of these speeches as types of populist texts is in keeping with Laclau's (2005, p. 33) argument that populists are defined not by their ideological commitment to a set of populist ideals, but instead by the style of articulation of a political position. In the case of the National Party, I suggest this can be thought of as a strategic confusion of the nation with class-based politics. Through critical analysis of subject construction in political parties' rhetoric, qualitative social scientists can make important additions to the debates on populism currently occurring in political science and provide useful conceptual corrections. This is especially so given the lack of attention paid to the National Party in the literature on populism in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Populism and its core binary

Debates over how to define populism and populists are fraught and often tied up in value judgements as much as they are assessments of political behaviour. The high degree of diversity in the conceptual definitions offered has led some to argue that populism as a concept has been too widely stretched (Barker & Vowles, 2020, p. 10). There exists a number of approaches to understanding and defining populism in the literature. Norris and Inglehart (2019), for example, have described populism as a style of rhetoric that emphasises the need of the rule of the people over elites. Thus, populism often presents itself as saving or acting in accordance with the spirit of democracy against those who have let it stagnate or be corrupted by the amassing of power by unelected or self-serving actors. Weyland (2017) argues that populism is best thought of as a political strategy. This analysis has been taken up by many who seek to understand the convergence of populism and neoliberalism in Latin America (Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 1999, 2017, 2021). Weyland (2021, pp. 185–186) argued that politicians who use the populist approach are often opportunists with weak ideological commitments and who are capable of quick revisions of key policy points. Populists, in this instance, seek to use policy for instrumental purposes and often imbue the sovereignty of the people within a single leader. Mudde, however, gives perhaps the most precise definition:

I define populism as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. (Mudde, 2004, p. 543)

Mudde's (2004) definition of populism is the most well-known example of the ideational approach to populism and is useful because it captures the two most consistent themes in the literature on populism: the primary antagonism between elites and the people, and the idea that the state has some sort of duty to enact the general will. Michael Kezin (2016, p. 17) has noted that common to the populism of both the left and the right is a critique aimed at a national elite. In both cases it is presupposed that there is large-scale collusion between the state and an unelected but powerful elite working against the interests of the everyday person. Adding to this, Pierre Ostiguy (2017), in what he terms the "socio-cultural approach to populism" (p. 74), argues that populists are best understood as leaders who perform the 'low' and show a closeness to a low culture. Ostiguy (2017) argues that this can be a by-product of discourse and strategy, thus offering support to both Mudde's and Weyland's approaches to theorising populism.

Katsambekis (2020, p. 62) has critiqued the ideational and sociocultural approach and instead draws on Licalo (2005). Katsambekis notes that discursive scholars begin by asking: "What is specific about how populists formulate their demands and interpellate citizens?" The focus here is on how the people of populism is constructed within discursive practice, and by paying attention to this, we can then assess the types of impact the populist project will have on the polity. While retaining insights from the sociocultural and ideational approach, it is within this tradition of focusing on the construction of the people through discursive practice that this article proceeds.

The invoking of the people-elite binary described above, however, remains the most consistent theme across the literature aimed at defining populism. This binary can be thought of as the core feature of most understandings of populism. It is consistent in examples of both left and right forms of populism. The idea that political sovereignty rested with the people is found in both those who campaigned for Brexit as well as the Pink Tide in Latin America, as was the idea that politics had become corrupted by the concentration of wealth and power in an elite with alternative moralities from the people. As this reliance on a people-elite antagonism remains so key to the literature, I have thought of the National Party's use of populism as breaking this binary. Its strategic discursive use of 'a people' lends itself closely enough with certain aspects of populism to be worth including in discussions within Aotearoa New Zealand politics. Direct appeals to the reinstatement of national sovereignty are, however, relatively rare in Aotearoa New Zealand's parliamentary politics. As Benjamin Moffitt (2017) has argued, the obvious populist party in the country is New Zealand First (see also Johnson et al., 2005, p. 90). The New Zealand National Party do not typically operate on these principles and the features identified by Weyland as operating among populists are not obvious.

The National Party have a consistent programmatic position and ideological commitment to fewer economic regulations and occupy a pro-business platform; often their policy programmes aim to benefit an economic elite in Aotearoa New Zealand. While implementing this economic project, the party's leaders have also drawn on an image of the 'every man'. Or in Ostiguy's language, they 'perform the low' by trying to distance themselves from high culture.

## **Contemporary populism in Aotearoa New Zealand**

Parliamentary politics in the second half of the 2010s looked markedly different in Aotearoa New Zealand when compared with the USA, UK and Australia. Inglehart and Norris (2016) have argued that a cultural backlash has led to the rise of populist movements associated both with the election of Donald Trump and the UK voting to leave the European Union. However, in 2017 a Labour-led coalition took power in Aotearoa New Zealand after campaigning on a broadly anti-populist and politically inclusive platform. Moreover, these political trends have occurred in a country that has institutional arrangements that would likely suit an authoritarian and/or populist leader – Aotearoa New Zealand does not have a formal ratified

constitution and has a unicameral legislative chamber, giving strong power to a parliamentary majority. Both of these would be well suited to a strong leader stamping a personal vision on the country.

The question of Aotearoa New Zealand being a populist exception has been discussed in depth in an edited volume that provides deep analyses of Aotearoa New Zealand voters' relationship with populism and, to a lesser extent, authoritarianism around the 2017 election (Vowles & Curtin, 2020). For political scientists working out of the liberal tradition, then, Aotearoa New Zealand seems to be something of a silver lining to the cloud of democratic dissatisfaction and uptake in exclusionary populism across the comparator countries. To add further to this broadly anti-populist and anti-authoritarian situation, Foa et al. (2020, p. 19) have found Aotearoa New Zealand to be the only advanced liberal democracy that has not seen a decline in democratic satisfaction since 1995. Where political scientists have identified populism in Aotearoa New Zealand (Barker & Vowles, 2020, p. 20; Moffitt, 2016), they typically identify it as enacting democratic mandates and the will of the people. The populism identified, it is claimed, maintains the democratic elements of the idea without making claims of political opponents being existential threats. Moffitt (2014, p. 293; 2017) has spoken of an "Atlantic bias" in the analysis of populism, as well as arguing that there is a distinctive form of Antipodean populism that social scientists should spend more time examining.

Despite this, New Zealand First, the party most consistently named as populist in Aotearoa New Zealand, was needed by Jacinda Ardern after the 2017 election for Labour to gain power through a coalition government.<sup>3</sup> Moffitt's analysis of populism in Aotearoa New Zealand is in keeping with the broad literature in identifying the key populist actor as Winston Peters, leader of New Zealand First (see also Johnson et al., 2005, p. 90). Of the parties comprising the previous parliament, only New Zealand First is widely considered to be overtly populist. Peters is also on record as having openly discussed his opinions on populism, saying: "Populism means that you're talking to the ordinary people and you're placing their views far higher than the Beltway and the paparazzi or dare I say the bureaucracy" (Graham-McLay, 2020). Analysis of populism as a rhetorical or cultural phenomenon in Aotearoa New Zealand, then, tends to focus on New Zealand First. Winston Peters openly reaffirms the ordinary people-elite binary and, as such, seems to own his label as a populist. Peters' departure from the National Party and founding of New Zealand First in 1993 is one reason why, in Aotearoa New Zealand, the economically focused neoliberal right and the nationalists interested in nativist politics do not share a party, unlike in the UK or USA.<sup>3</sup> This has probably contributed to the ongoing stability of the National Party, as the party has not had to spend too much time managing conflicts between a pro-business and free market economic camp and a nationalist majoritarian one, which has been the case in both the Conservative Party in the UK and the Republican Party in the USA. Instead, they have attempted to wrap their neoliberalism in a soft civic nationalism that is not typically anti-immigration or nativist, although it has strayed into majoritarianism at various times.

While it is certainly the case that the tone of Aotearoa New Zealand's politics from 2016 has been notably different from other countries that it is typically compared with and the country has not seen a broad rise in overt nationalist or populist politics, there has been an ongoing competition to represent the everyday Kiwi. As a result of these trends, the literature on populism in Aotearoa New Zealand rarely examines how the National Party relates to this time of politics outside of historical comparison. Curtin and Vowles (2020, pp. 20–21) in their discussion of populism in the 2017 election, for example, cite Muldoon's electoral success as evidence of politicians with authoritarian and populist streaks able to win elections in Aotearoa New Zealand. This analysis, however, underestimates the way politics has evolved since the 1980s in Aotearoa New Zealand, as it assumes too much continuity in the country's political culture, especially with the deregulation of the economy in the 1980s and the shift to MMP in the 1990s.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of Winston Peter's political biography and his populist politics, see McLachlan (2013), especially Chapter Four.

Curtin and Vowles's (2020) analysis of the 2017 election in Aotearoa New Zealand found that populism was typically a variant of centre-left populism that took concern with economic inequality. This analysis is conceptually too narrow and does not pay enough attention to how the National Party works to discursively construct an everyday subject in Aotearoa New Zealand.

### **Strategic populism for elite ends**

During John Key's 2007 campaign to become prime minister, he gave a series of speeches where he sought to lay out what he described as "The Kiwi Way" (Key, 2007a). The speeches engage in a mixture of policy announcements as well as outlining values, with the distinction between the two often blurred. The first of these was given at the Burnside Rugby Club in Christchurch and focused on common themes to the National Party, such as "the growing underclass" (Key, 2007a). The use of a rugby club as a venue has obvious cultural significance in Aotearoa New Zealand. Rugby is the national sport and is widely seen as an everyday part of life; in rural areas, rugby clubs also often act as key social hubs. Todd Muller also understood this when he gave his first speech as National Party leader in the Te Puna Rugby Club in the Bay of Plenty. Like Key, Muller returned to his home town for his first speech, drawing on his upbringing as informative of his values. The decision to use rugby clubs as venues helps these leaders sell a vision of themselves as representatives of the everyday. Devadas and Nichols (2012) have written of how John Key's fondness of posing with Richie McCaw connects him to a certain type of national building block referencing "masculinity, national identity, everydayness, and mateship" (p. 22).

In one of the speeches at the National Party conference in 2007, John Key rhetorically asks the audience their purpose for attending and then goes on to answer:

I'll give you one reason. We're sick of Labour telling us what to do. We're sick of being told how to bring up our kids, what to put in school lunchboxes, and that we have to microchip our dogs. We're sick of being told off for buying houses and for eating pies. (Key, 2007b)

This quote is particularly revealing. Elements here certainly seem to be moving towards the populist. The overbearing state enforcing the rule of experts around what to eat or how to monitor pets all sounds like the type of rhetoric that could come from Winston Peters, Boris Johnson or Donald Trump. Likewise, the reference to eating of meat pies could be constructed as an 'acting of the low'. Meat pies in Aotearoa New Zealand, as in Australia and other parts of the Commonwealth, are an everyday food that has associations with the working class and masculine consumption habits. However, the striking exception to this is that he also mentions buying houses. Housing affordability has been a perennial issue in Aotearoa New Zealand with it being a major campaign issue for multiple parties in recent elections.

A similar argument was made by Simon Bridges, who was leader of the National Party from 2018 to 2020. Bridges claimed that the capital gains tax proposed by the Tax Working Group, and considered but not implemented by Jacinda Arden's Labour-led government, went against the national way of life. On Twitter, Bridges said of the working group set up to investigate the possibility of implementing a capital gains tax: "This Tax Working Group report is an assault on the 'Kiwi way of life'. I will fight it every step of the way" (Bridges, 2019). Bridges then expanded on his conception of the Kiwi way of life on a video shared by Newshub (D. Satherley, 2019). In the video, he lists a range of things that may be considered as part of the Kiwi way of life. Central to these is the focus on the economic, including "owning a bach [a local term for a holiday home], starting a business and employing people and growing it, and reward for risk". Bridges references his own background in a working-class family growing up in West Auckland. In his speech at the Burnside Rugby Club, Key, likewise, referenced his upbringing in Christchurch when he discussed his mother being on a widow's benefit (Key, 2007a). Demonstrating this sort of humility transmits

a greater sense of authenticity to the idea that these politicians are not themselves elites, or at least did not used to be and that the barriers to success are personal not institutional.

Bridges' attempt to link the capital gains tax to being 'anti-Kiwi' has a dual purpose. First, it allows for the association of himself with the institutions of the New Zealand nation against those in government who would corrupt them. Secondly, and more interestingly, it links this sense of nationhood with a particular class interest. This point was quickly picked up by those on Twitter who responded to Bridges by mocking his suggestion that the capital gains tax went against the Kiwi way of life by arguing that if that were so, then "painting over mould in a rented flat was a Kiwi way of life", too (D. Satherley, 2019).

What these respondents to Bridges effectively understood was that the invitation to interpolate oneself as normal is an invitation to act in the interest of institutionalised politics and, more specifically, in the interests of a specific class. Drawing on what Anderson (1991, p. 7) has termed the "deep, horizontal comradeship" of belonging to a nation, the National Party's rhetoric has sought to muddy the distinction between national identity and belonging to the property-owning class. By appealing to a sense of imagined unity across the national group, we are invited to forget the disparities within the group and to define ourselves not in reference to one another but to an imagined shared belonging to the community (Anderson 1991). Imagined communities are upheld through a shared imagining of being a part of a national project and understanding yourself as being bound up in a communal project with others based on a shared sense of nation. The paving over of internal inequalities via reference to the nation is an area that perhaps needed further exploration in Anderson's (1991) original presentation of the imagined communities thesis. It is key to the way that the New Zealand National Party invoke the nation, that inequalities can be dissolved by appealing to a shared membership in the nation.

There appears to be two purposes in the use of these quotidian notions. The first is a positive one that asks for those listening to interpolate themselves as subjects who are themselves normal and everyday. The second is the negative side of this coin. As the French philosopher Georges Canguilhem (1991) has noted, the normal is so often defined in contrast to something that is seen as pathological that the two typically become constitutive concepts. Recourse to the normal props up a commitment to notions of the status quo and having a moral element to their construction.

This idea can also be found in the Australian expression used by Prime Minister Scott Morrison: the "quiet Australians", whom he credited with his electoral success in 2019 (Bennister & Obendorf 2019, p. 25) – and the supposed cultural opposite of those who would express their discontent with the coalition's refugee policies, bushfire crisis management and climate-change denialism. Part of what this term aims at is the association of those who are politically vocal and engaged as necessarily unlike the majority of Australians. Politicians' reference to a 'normal Kiwi' continues a long tradition of imaging and inventing a national subject in its discourse that is ill defined but tries to invoke moral and political allegiances through reference to the nation.

Leon Salter (2016, p. 125) has argued that John Key purposefully defined the people in opposition to "the left" in the 2014 election. In response to the publication of Nicky Hager's book *Dirty Politics*, Key is quoted as saying:

"If there's dirty politics, it's actually coming from the Left," Mr Key said in Dunedin this afternoon. "If you look at the Left, they don't want to talk about the issues that matter to New Zealanders." (Newshub, 2014)

Salter (2016), who draws on Laclau's (2005) understanding of populism as being centred on the 'naming of a people', points out that in quotes like this, Key is establishing himself as a representative of the "authentic us". Importantly, the 'us' here is a narrow understanding of Kiwis or New Zealanders who share the same middle-class concerns as Key. It is not a global movement or political project but a sense of

shared belonging to a national project that draws the political community here. Salter's (2016) analysis correctly points out the importance of naming the people in opposition to the left during the 2014 election, however, was a moment of heightened polarisation that has not been representative of elections through the previous two decades (barring the 2005 election). For the most part in National's approach, though, it is not so much the negative referent of the left that is doing the work but the positive association with the nation.

Ironically, part of the reason the National Party are able to benefit from the blurring of this distinction is Aotearoa New Zealand's long history of considering itself an egalitarian nation. Claudia Bell's (1996) work has discussed how Aotearoa New Zealand socially constructed itself with reference to an imagined history, one where hard work was rewarded and entrenched notions of political and religious discrimination and unjust inequality were absent. The idea that one could always pull oneself up by one's bootstraps and make something in such a fertile and giving land continued long past the time when the majority of the country were rurally based. The idea that Aotearoa New Zealand has few if any barriers to democratic and economic participation is rarely challenged by the National Party or its supporters, who seem to consistently hold that opportunities for success are open for all or most New Zealanders (N. Satherley et al., 2020, p. 13). For many, there has been preserved an idea of Aotearoa New Zealand as a nation that does not have entrenched inequalities despite the economic evidence to the contrary. This provides a cultural attachment to the ideas that hard work pays rewards. We can see this theme explored further on the National Party's website where they detail their values including "ambition and success; with lower taxes, reward for hard work, and equal opportunity for all". This page on their website then ends with the claim "Our Values are Kiwi Values" (National, n.d.).

As their economic focus is demonstrably in keeping with pro-business policy positions, the National Party's appeal to the people cannot accommodate notions of the people as the working class defined in opposition to those they sell their labour to. Focusing on corrupt elites who have supposedly lost touch with the values of ordinary people or betrayed their country is also not a possibility for a party that have spent the majority of the last decade in government. This type of populism is easily locatable in the populisms of other advanced liberal democracies. Instead, the National Party aims to speak for the people through reference to a vague notion of national belonging. In order to provide this association with national interests with a sense of authenticity, there are often tactical uses of populism lite.

The idea, then, that Aotearoa New Zealand is a country founded on egalitarian ideals is deeply embedded in the nation's understanding of itself. When it is suggested that there may be structural barriers to the buying of a home or getting a well-paid job, the National Party can only make sense of this through the idea that the state may be acting as that barrier. Structural barriers to personal success are rarely openly admitted and, when they are, it is usually only in reference to the barriers of the state blocking business opportunities. The policies that deepen these inequalities are depoliticised and justified by an ideological association with reference to an idea of the New Zealand nation. The refusal to pitch their politics in terms of the people versus the elite may make the National Party hard to outright characterise as populists. However, it does not exclude them from political tactics that are at least parallel to the populist appeal to the people. The party attempts to disguise a pro-market and business-oriented vision of Aotearoa New Zealand as a national project. This, I believe, can be summarised as tactical populism for elite ends. There is a conscious presentation of the nation and a way of life that needs to be defended. However, the sense of nation is limited to those who own property – an idea that was reaffirmed by National Party Leader Judith Collins who, in 2020, reaffirmed home ownership "as absolutely crucial for the Kiwi way of life" (1News, 2020).



## Populism lite and neoliberalism

The protectionist and nativist underpinnings of the two most dominant populist movements in the USA and the UK (the election of Donald Trump and Brexit, respectively) suggest that neoliberalism and conservative or nationalist populism are uneasy bedfellows. Trump was willing to walk away from the Trans Pacific Partnership trade agreement, claiming that walking away was “a great thing for the American worker” (BBC, 2017). This seems an obvious affront to a neoliberal vision of proper economic conduct as it prioritises a group identity (the American people/worker) as the beneficiaries of state intervention as opposed to working within the typical neoliberal logic of removing barriers for international capital.

Neoliberalism, much like populism, has risked losing its analytic purchase by becoming overused and theoretically stretched. Whether the New Zealand National Party is still a neoliberal party post-Ruth Richardson as finance minister, and the Fifth Labour Government, is debatable. Roper (2011), for example, has argued John Key’s Fifth National Government maintained a commitment to neoliberalism. However, much depends on how strong we make the criteria for determining a party or person as neoliberal. David Harvey (2007, p. 2) presents a thin understanding of neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade”. Others, such as Quinn Slobodian (2018), have argued that neoliberalism should be tied to a commitment to globalism. Slobodian (2018, p. 9) whose primary focus is on European theorists, notes the importance of neoliberals theorising global economic orders in their models governing nation states, however, remains the primary goal of political parties. For parties inspired by neoliberal economics or geared towards market-based solutions of policy problems, strategies for vernacularising these politics are necessary.

In this sense, the analysis of the New Zealand National Party I have presented here hopes to respond, and build upon, Sören Brandes’ (2019, p. 63) point that often analyses of neoliberalism do not engage with how popular legitimacy is constructed for these projects. In opposition to the literature that stresses the covert strategy of neoliberalism as a project, Brandes (2019) argues that neoliberals actively seek to engage with a public in a way that resembles how populists campaign. After discussing Milton Friedman’s role in campaign with Reagan and in Friedman’s TV show *Free to Choose*, Brandes (2019, 74) describes this as “market populism”. Moving slightly from Brandes’ own language, market populism involves framing the people-elite antagonism as one where the state is an institution of and for the elite whereas the market sides with the people. The naming of this process as populism requires adopting Laclau’s (2005) theory of populism where the people-elite antagonism is produced from the naming of it, or its discursive construction, as opposed to an objective political reality. Brandes (2019, p. 75) rightly points out that key to the construction of popular legitimacy by neoliberal (or at least pro-business) groups is the reversal of the idea that the state is an institution that works for the everyday person. This process is of course discernible in the National Party’s claims that over-regulation or heavy handedness of the state is objectional to the everyday Kiwi. Instead, the Party’s values of “empowering individual freedom and choice, personal responsibility, and caring communities” (National, n.d.) suggest a less interventionist state. While Brandes (2019) usefully shows how pro-market ideas can be tied to populism, it is important to attend to the additional role of exploring how market populism becomes vernacularised by political actors in specific national settings.

## Conclusion

The political rhetoric of the New Zealand National Party has strategically used a presentation of itself as a representative of the normal or everyday New Zealander – a subject it has decided not to flesh out with too much detail, other than the crucial preference for neoliberal policies, and perhaps a taste for rugby and meat pies. This use of populist-lite rhetoric bears strong similarity with existing themes in the literature discussing populism. At times this involves what Ostiguy (2017) has termed the acting of the low. Likewise, Katsambekis's (2020) discursive account of populism as centred on the construction of a people is applicable. A key strategy for the National Party, then, is the association of the ordinary and everyday practices of the nation with market logics and practices, or in Brandes' terms, market populism.

The National Party's politics also meet the criterion of a thin understanding of neoliberalism, and the Party has worked to discursively construct and draw upon a market-oriented subject to the nation's project. While this may have helped guard Aotearoa New Zealand politics from the re-emergence and explosion of overt right-wing nativism or ethnic nationalism in parliament, it has involved appropriating notions of the everyday for party political gain. It is in this meeting ground that considerations regarding populism and neoliberal subject formation have not been properly considered in the literature on populism in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. The contest over representing the interests of the everyday citizen is unlikely to recede from political debate in either Aotearoa New Zealand or the typical comparator countries anytime soon. From the example of the New Zealand National Party that I have given here, we can see how nationalism may be mobilised by traditional non-populist actors for social ends that tend towards support for a depoliticised society. I suspect this acts as a way of constricting political horizons and ideas of what is possible. By claiming that a policy, such as the capital gains tax, goes against the nation's shared notions of what constitutes the good life, a political party positions those who would support these policies as outside of the shared imagination of who is normal. Making claims for this imagined subject is also key part of populist rhetoric. Ultimately, this leaves an analysis of the neoliberalism and populist rhetoric of the National Party in a situation where they have tried to keep one of the polls of the populist binary and do away with the other; put otherwise, they have broken the binary of populism.

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