The democratic content of contemporary representative parliamentary democracy is principally expressed through periodic elections in which the franchise is extended to all adults. In theory, governments are provided popular legitimacy by the fact that a majority of citizens voted for them. They are then expected to govern in reasonable accordance with the mandate provided by those who brought them to power. If voters are turning out in low numbers, however, this legitimacy is eroded. In this respect, non-voters are a somewhat threatening presence for contemporary parliamentary democracies. The report of the Electoral Commission on the 2014 General Election reveals the anxiety non-voters induce: ‘A healthy democracy is in everyone’s interest’, they argue, and is not something ‘New Zealanders can afford to take for granted’.1 Declining voter turnout has been common across developed democracies over the past 30 years, and ‘has been particularly steep and persistent’ in Aotearoa New Zealand.2 After two general elections in 2011 and 2014 in which the lowest and second-lowest voter turnout was recorded since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1893, the Electoral Commission noted that ‘New Zealand has a serious problem with declining voter participation’.3 This report examines the problem of voter turnout decline: what has been causing it and what it may mean. In the report’s first section, we draw on research from the Electoral Commission and Statistics New Zealand to outline the demographic characteristics of the ‘typical’ non-voter. This tells us who is most disconnected from parliamentary democracy in this country, whether by choice or by circumstance. It also hints at some of the wider structural issues associated with voter turnout decline. In the second section, we outline and critique the manner in which the Electoral Commission and much political science scholarship has approached the issue. Broadly speaking, the Electoral Commission and mainstream political science focus on why individuals do not vote and what can be done to persuade them otherwise. While this is useful research, it does not get to the root of the issue. In the third section, then, we consider how a number of structural changes in the capitalist political economy and the institution of representative parliamentary democracy have negatively impacted voter turnout. These changes raise larger questions about the efficacy of contemporary parliamentary democracy and
the ability of government to respond to voters. The issue, as we see it, is that voter turnout decline is symptomatic of wider structural problems with the content and delivery of representative democracy in this county. While the Electoral Commission and much of the scholarship on the subject suggests the problem can be addressed by motivating individuals to go to the polls, we argue fundamental changes are needed if representative democracy is to become more meaningful to voters.

**DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF NON-VOTERS**

Voter turnout has declined relatively steeply in New Zealand since the mid-1980s. Turnout was high in 1984, with 93.7% of those enrolled voting. In contrast, the 2011 General Election saw just 74.2% of those enrolled vote. In real terms, this means that only 69.6% of the estimated eligible population voted in 2011, an historic low since the introduction of universal suffrage. There was a slight increase in both the 2014 and 2017 general elections, with 72.1% and 73.7% of the estimated eligible population voting respectively. Despite these mild upturns, over a quarter of the eligible population still abstained; approximately 938,019 eligible voters declined to cast a ballot in the 2017 General Election. Enrolment rates have also fallen in recent years. In the 2008 General Election, 4.7% of the estimated eligible population were not enrolled to vote; 2011 saw this increase to 6.3%, and 2014 to 7.4%, with it staying relatively steady in 2017 at 7.6%.

Determining who is not voting provides some initial clues to why this decline may be occurring. While non-voters are socio-demographically diverse, some strong trends can be discerned concerning ethnicity, age, and class. Non-voters are more likely to be from non-Pākehā ethnic groups. The Electoral Commission finds that those enrolled in Māori electorates are around 14% less likely to vote than those enrolled in the general electorates. There is a myriad of institutional and systemic issues at play here, including a persistent mistrust of central government among Māori, a sizeable Māori population living in Australia who largely lack representation, and the way that mechanisms like referenda (due to their majoritarian character) minimize the voice of Māori. A further issue, of course, is that the country’s electoral system is European in origin and not culturally meaningful for many Māori. General electorate areas with high Māori and Pasifika populations, such as Māngere, Manukau East, and Manurewa, have around 9% lower turnout than average. Interestingly, while turnout increased slightly in the 2017 General Election, and among Māori and Pasifika overall, it actually declined in these three electorates.

New Zealanders of Asian descent, had the lowest turnout per-capita for the 2008 and 2011 elections, something that can be partially attributed to the large number of recent migrants in this demographic. Non-voters also tend to be younger. In their report on non-voters in the 2008 and 2011 elections, Statistics New Zealand found that 42% of people aged 18–24 years did not vote in the 2011 General Election. In comparison, only 5.2% of those over 65 years abstained. There has been an uptick in the percentage of people aged 18–24 voting, with the 2017 General Election witnessing an increase of 6.5% from the 2014 General Election. There was also marked growth in turnout from people aged 25–29 and 30–34, with 5.5% and 3.5% increases respectively.
Non-voters are more likely to have a low income, less assets, and are often unemployed. For instance, Statistics New Zealand found 28% of non-voters did not have ‘enough money to meet everyday needs’. In the 2011 General Election, 35% of unemployed people were non-voters, with younger people less likely to be employed and owning fewer assets. Occupation is also a factor. For instance, a labourer is twice as unlikely to vote as a manager. Non-voters are also more likely to live in rural areas. This, in turn, is entwined with other demographic characteristics. For instance, Māori non-voters are more frequently located in provincial locations, and people aged 18–34 are generally less likely to turnout in rural areas than their urban counterparts.

Less significant is education. There was, on average, only 3.35% more non-voters with no-qualification as opposed to those with higher-qualifications in the 2008 and 2011 general elections. Likewise, reported gender does not appear to be a significant factor in considering non-voters, with women only 2% more likely to vote than men.

The socio-demographic characteristics outlined here are intersectional. For instance, a longitudinal study found that young Māori with a low standard of living are the least likely to vote. While some care is necessary when making generalisations about the characteristics of a ‘typical’ non-voter, it appears that ethnicity and income are salient structural factors, and that generational differences are also significant. This socio-demographic profile of the ‘typical’ non-voter provides a map of who, predominantly, may be unable to vote or may feel disconnected, disillusioned, or apathetic towards voting.

**INCREASING PARTICIPATION**

While a demographic profile of the typical non-voter is useful when considering who needs to be targeted in campaigns to increase voter turnout, it reveals little in itself about why turnout has declined or why it is most pronounced in these demographics. In this respect, the Electoral Commission tends to draw on research from political science that approaches the issue on an individualistic basis. For instance, psychological explanations for voting behaviour are frequent in political science and are often paired with ‘rational choice’ cost/benefit modelling. It is commonly held that an individual’s level of political engagement is determined by their sense of ‘political efficacy’—‘the feeling that individual action does or can have an impact upon the political process’. The higher the degree of political efficacy, it is argued, the more likely an individual will participate in political processes, with voting treated here as ‘the prototypical act of political participation’.

An Electoral Commission survey using this approach found that 6% of respondents felt that it ‘makes no difference who the government is’, suggesting feelings of low political efficacy among these respondents.

Advocates of Rational Choice Theory conjecture that all subjects engage in cost/benefit analyses when considering whether or not to vote. As explained by the political scientist Jack Vowles, ‘the basic utility-maximizing rational choice model’ identifies costs, benefits, ‘and the probability of a vote having an effect’, which can be ‘supplemented by inferences about the incentives created by different institutional arrangements’. Costs, like getting to the polling station and acquiring knowledge about the various political parties, are weighed against
benefits, such as the possibility of your vote making a difference. If certain variables change—for instance, if voting or enrolment are made more difficult through complicated enrolment procedures, or it becomes hard to reach polling booths—then the costs of voting begin to outweigh the perceived benefits, and individuals are less likely to vote.

Political scientist Mark Franklin expands on this rather limited theory, examining how the competitiveness of elections and the habitual nature of voting factor into the cost/benefit calculus of an individual’s decision to vote or not. Franklin argues that uncertainty around the outcome of an election is the biggest motivating factor in deciding whether to vote or not. If the outcome of an election is effectively known in advance then rational actors have no good reason to vote; alternatively, if the outcome of the election remains unpredictable throughout an electoral cycle, they would have greater ‘reason to believe that their votes might make a difference’. This partly explains turnout decline in Aotearoa New Zealand over recent decades. Vowles, for instance, finds that declining competition between Labour and National was one of the main reasons that turnout fell in both the 1999 and 2002 general elections. But if this is true, why would anyone vote in an uncompetitive election? Franklin suggests that most people continue to vote over time because of habit. If an individual acquires the habit of voting early on in life, they will vote consistently throughout their lifetime. In this way, the competitiveness of elections over time also matters. If an election is not competitive, then the cohort of voters who would be voting in one of their first elections may not be inspired to vote and may therefore fail to acquire the habit. This has an ongoing negative effect on turnout.

The above issues also tie into voting laws and regulations, the structure of parliament and electoral systems, and the structural and/or practical impediments that limit the ability of some to vote. Variation in these areas is shown to affect voter turnout. The more difficult it is to vote or to enrol to vote, for instance, the less inclined people are to do so. Practical obstacles to voting in Aotearoa New Zealand include such mundane issues as the difficulty of travelling to the polling booth or enrolling to vote, and bad weather on election day, although these issues are becoming less salient with nearly 50% of total votes in the 2017 General Election cast in advance. The structure of the electoral system also influences voter turnout. Proportional representation systems are shown to engage more voters, particularly those from minority groups, as they feel better represented under a proportional system. An initial spike in turnout following the shift to the mixed-member proportional electoral system in 1996 supports this idea: turnout increased, especially from voters in minority groups and voters on the far-left. Drawing on data from the 1993–1996 New Zealand Election Study, for instance, one study found that ‘more voters came to see that their votes really mattered, few thought their MPs did not care or were out of touch, and fewer thought that government was run by a few big interests’. However, such positivity appears to have quickly eroded as turnout resumed its decline from the 1999 General Election until the 2014 and 2017 general elections, in which there were mild increases.

Influenced by these lines of research and seeking to increase voter turnout, the Electoral Commission, before 2011, largely focused on making voting and enrolling easier. They changed tack, however, after the historically low
turnout in the 2011 General Election and survey research that found that non-participation was ‘less about institutional barriers and more about a lack of interest and motivation’.37 According to the Electoral Commission’s research, people in Aotearoa New Zealand do not vote largely because they are ‘disconnected’, ‘disengaged’, lack interest in politics, or lack motivation.38 Increasing feelings of political efficacy among potential voters has therefore been the central means by which the Electoral Commission seeks to improve turnout. They also suggest that the habit of voting in Aotearoa New Zealand could be fostered by promoting political discussions in the home, improving civics education, and through simple actions such as sending text messages reminding young people to vote on election day.39

In short, the Electoral Commission tends to focus on how the political efficacy and rational choice calculus of individuals can be improved as well as how the habit of voting could be encouraged, which is a practical but limited response to non-voting. We argue that it is necessary to go beyond considerations of institutional and motivational problems and ask how the wider political-economic climate and the contemporary structure of representative parliamentary democracy may restrict turnout or demotivate potential voters.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE AND TURNOUT DECLINE
The epochal transformation in the capitalist political economy that has occurred over the past four decades began in this country in 1984. This transformation was built around the liberalisation of trade and capital flows, the deregulation of labour policy, the destruction of trade union power, the entrenchment of anti-inflationary monetary policy, and reductions in income and corporate tax rates, all resulting in a massive upward redistribution of wealth. This paradigm shift, and related changes in the character of electoral politics, have undermined or eroded the democratic elements of representative parliamentary democracy in this country. In this section, we detail four developments linked to this political-economic transformation that have had particularly negative impacts on voter turnout in Aotearoa New Zealand: the ideological convergence of the major political parties on economic policy; the declining ability or desire of parties and unions to mobilise voters; constraints on government expenditure created by trade and capital liberalisation as well as declining tax revenue; and the development and entrenchment of wealth inequality. Consideration of these developments suggests that reducing institutional barriers to voting and motivating people to go to the polls is not a sufficient solution to the problem of turnout decline. What is needed is more far-reaching transformations of representative parliamentary democracy in Aotearoa New Zealand. The work of the Matike Mai group towards this end is particularly important.40

A general cross-party consensus regarding the management and implementation of economic policy has developed over the past three decades between the two major political parties, Labour and National, and is largely shared by minor parties such as New Zealand First and the Green Party.41 While there remains a distinguishable left–right policy divide between Labour and National,42 both parties have demonstrated a consistent ideological commitment to opening the economy to global market forces, constraining fiscal investment,
and disempowering organised labour. Both parties, that is, have shifted their economic policy rightward in absolute terms, beginning in 1984 with the Fourth Labour Government’s surprise ‘neoliberal’ turn. This lack of substantive difference between the major parties on economic policy appears to have depressed turnout over time.\textsuperscript{43}

Relatedly, the mobilisation of working class voters has declined. This has meant that less pressure is applied over time to parties of the centre-left to generate policy that benefits working class voters. The ability of parties to mobilise voters has waned notably, with people less likely to strongly identify with a political party today.\textsuperscript{44} Examining turnout decline in Aotearoa New Zealand between the 1996 and 1999 general elections, Vowles concludes that two of the biggest reasons for turnout decline over this period were ‘weaker party identifications and reduced party campaign contact’.\textsuperscript{45} One reason for this decline in party identification is given by the political scientists Richard Katz and Peter Mair, who argue that since the 1970s parties in developed democracies have increasingly seen themselves, and have come to be seen as, ‘brokers among social groups and between social groups and the state, rather than as the political arms of specific groups’.\textsuperscript{46} This has been driven, they argue, by the rise of a large middle class, the professionalisation of politics, the need to attract large political donations to cover the costs of elections, and the ideological convergence that has developed over the last four decades regarding economic policy.\textsuperscript{47} In Aotearoa New Zealand this change has largely seen political parties on the left become less active in mobilising the poorer sectors of the population than they were in previous decades, preferring to speak to middle class interests instead. Combined with the lack of substantive difference between major parties’ economic policies, their declining role as the ‘political arm’ of different social groups appears to have depressed turnout over time, with the more open class conflict that once characterised elections increasingly absent.

Unions are also less capable of mobilising large blocks of voters than they were in previous decades. The presence of strong working class unions is shown to increase voter participation among both union members and non-members. Because working class unions generally advocate and lobby for the interests of the working class, in doing so they can shift parties’ policies so that they are more relevant to these voters, encouraging voter participation in the process.\textsuperscript{48} This, in turn, mobilises voters on the other side of the political spectrum who perceive the strength of unions as a threat. Further, strong unions have historically pulled left parties’ further leftwards. Consequently, waning union efficacy, the result of changing patterns in the division of labour and the organisation of production as well as government legislation such as the Employment Contracts Act 1991 and Employment Relations Act 2000, corresponds with the drift of left parties toward a pro-market-liberalisation position. With decreased membership and strength, unions no longer have the mobilisation capacities they once did.\textsuperscript{49} Because of the declining ability of political parties and unions to mobilise working class voters there is less incentive for nominally left political parties to respond to working class demands—a gap has opened between these parties and those who used to form their core constituencies. Those now neglected by political parties, who once may have been unionised, are less likely to vote.
Over this same period, trade and capital liberalisation has also placed certain restraints on governments’ ability to formulate economic policy. This further contributes to the ideological convergence of the major parties as to what the New Zealand economy should look like and how it should be run. International studies have examined how the liberalisation of trade and capital flows across borders has affected electorates’ perceptions of their political leaders as accountable for national economic performance. One study, analysing the correlation between incumbent support and economic performance, finds that ‘Voter propensities to hold incumbents to accounts for the economy diminish as national economies become more exposed to the outside world’. This suggests that the perception among voters, whether correct or not, is that the more open a country’s economy is, the less control its politicians have over its direction. Further research indicates that economic integration has decreased the responsiveness of political parties with experience in government to the demands of voters, with these parties increasingly favouring the interests of global market actors instead; economic integration is also shown to restrict parties’ policy frameworks as there is an overriding imperative to maintain market-friendly conditions. In sum, the potential lack of control that governments have over economic conditions, and their potential unwillingness to pursue policies that run contrary to continued economic integration, are understood to decrease government responsiveness to voters and therefore decrease citizens’ likelihood of voting. This research raises significant questions around the ability of governments in open liberal market economies such as Aotearoa New Zealand to effectively respond to its citizens.

One instance where this can be seen to play out is the constraints, real or imagined, that public and private debt levels place upon the government’s formulation of economic policy. Public debt has risen in many developed democracies as a result of the diminishing tax receipts collected by governments’ over the last four decades. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this is largely the result of the liberalisation of trade and capital flows, the deregulation of labour, and the lowering of tax rates that began here in 1984. While successive governments have responded by cutting back on fiscal investment, they have also been increasingly reliant on borrowing to cover remaining fiscal shortfalls.

While Aotearoa New Zealand has relatively low levels of public debt comparative to many other developed democracies, with net core Crown debt at 21.2% of GDP as of April 2019, it is more exposed to financial shocks given its small size, openness, and high levels of private sector and household debt, than many comparative countries. As such, for the past three decades, successive governments in Aotearoa New Zealand have focused on consolidating public debt and maintaining a good credit rating, something that requires them to limit fiscal investment if they are unwilling to significantly raise taxes. This tradition appears to be continuing under the current Labour-led Government, who have pledged to honour a number of ‘budget responsibility rules’. In addition to several other broad commitments, these rules are commitments to keep core Crown expenditure below 30% of GDP, to reduce net core Crown debt to below 20% of GDP (changing to a range of 15–25% of GDP as of 2021/2022), and to run sustainable operating surpluses. These commitments come at a time when large-scale investment in health, housing, and civic
A vicious cycle is in play. Those in lower socio-economic groups are less likely to vote because they are less represented in government and no longer mobilised to the same extent by unions and political parties. Because major parties do not target them, these groups, in turn, become less likely to vote. As voter turnout from the economically disadvantaged declines, so does their political influence. Political parties are therefore ever-more incentivised to respond to the demands of those who are materially well-off.

Finally, wealth inequality has increased dramatically in Aotearoa New Zealand following the liberal reforms of the 1980s. One consequence of this is that the ability of the working class and poor to pressure political parties and the state is increasingly limited today when compared to the influence of the top 10% of earners. The disproportionate influence of the wealthy, and the contemporary propensity for the privatisation of essential services, leads to economic inequality and inequality in political representation becoming mutually reinforcing dynamics. Diminished fiscal investment, for instance, compounds the disparity in political influence between classes.\(^5\) Declining investment in the public sphere means that the middle and upper-middle classes increasingly favour the consumption of private goods and services and therefore favour lower taxes. Consequently, while policies of privatisation and economic integration can negatively impact the living standards of lower classes, they also have the effect of further entrenching middle and upper-middle class demands for private sector development in areas like health and education. As the public sector is thinned out, the voting-bloc composed of higher-income citizens demands more private resources, which the lower-income sectors of society cannot afford. As a result, governments are further incentivised to hollow out public investment because middle class citizens are the most consistent voters.

However, appreciation of these issues suggests that significant structural reform is needed to stimulate voter turnout—or, more importantly, to strengthen and deepen democratic practices in this country. Four points, drawn from the structural dynamics noted above, appear to us as necessary starting points for responding to growing numbers of non-voters. First, we need political parties that genuinely reflect the interests of the working class, the precarious, and ethnic minorities. This can be addressed by both the formation of new political parties and
Third, we need a paradigm shift in how we think about government economic intervention and taxation. The reigning political consensus is that taxation should be relatively low and government intervention in the economy minimal; this greatly restricts fiscal investment, disadvantaging the already economically and politically marginalised. So long as this political consensus dominates, the investment required in areas such as housing and health will not materialise. Reshaping this political consensus should be a priority for left parties and movements.

Fourth, and relatedly, we need a far-reaching redistribution of wealth and a more equitable distribution of ownership over the means by which it is produced. Wealth inequality is antithetical to the concept of democracy. As long as some citizens have far more material wealth than others, they will continue to wield an outsized degree of political influence and delegitimise the foundation of representative electoral democracy: that one person has one vote and that all votes are equal in influence.

Second, we need a revitalised union movement. The nature of work and employment has changed in many ways since the heyday of working class unions. Today, workers lack collective representation and organisational power in many industries, and traditional bastions of union power have been diminished over the last four decades. Organised labour is able to pressure government, political parties, and employers into providing better working conditions and higher remuneration and can also act as a mobilising force in electoral politics. Community-facing and militant unions, such as Unite and FIRST, who work with the most precarious and economically disadvantaged workers in this country, are examples of working class counter-power. Support for such unions is an effective means of reversing democratic decline due to their reach into the country’s most disadvantaged communities.

organisations, and also through the application of political pressure to existing parties that are left-aligned. 57
NOTES


2 Ibid., i.

3 Ibid.


18 Ibid.


29 Ibid., pp. 56–58.

30 Ibid., p. 57.

31 Ibid., p. 57.


36 Ibid., p. 551.


45 Ibid.
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47 Ibid., 758.


56 Streeck, How Will Capitalism End? p. 112.

57 For a range of Left perspectives on how political organisation and mobilisation might be reimagined in Aotearoa New Zealand, see Campbell Jones and Shannon Walsh, eds. New Forms of Political Organisation (Auckland: Economic and Social Research Aotearoa, 2018).

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