

***From English to Luxon, from Housing Woes to Law-and-Order:
A Decade of the Chinese Vote in New Zealand***

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In the world of political polling, longevity is rare. Among ethnic community surveys, it's almost unheard of. Yet for ten years, we've been tracking the political pulse of New Zealand's Chinese voters. The results tell a story that is both consistent and surprising - of a community that votes in high numbers, leans decisively centre-right, but whose priorities shift with the economic weather, social climate, and deeply rooted cultural values.

1. The Only Decade-Long Tracker of Its Kind

Chinese people have been part of New Zealand's story since the 1840s, contributing to its economic, cultural, and social fabric for nearly two centuries. Yet, despite this long history, political enfranchisement came late, and full voting rights were not extended to all Chinese residents until well into the 20th century. Even today, a lack of deep understanding of Chinese voters persists within the wider political sphere, and misperceptions or simplistic assumptions often cloud their motivations. The Chinese community is not only one of the fastest-growing in New Zealand, but also one of the most socio-economically engaged and diverse ethnic groups according to their place of origin, language, and other socioeconomic status. In 2023, ethnic Chinese formed 5.6 per cent of New Zealand's population, a higher share than in other English-speaking countries with large ethnic Chinese communities, such as Australia (5.5 per cent in 2021), Canada (4.7 per cent in 2021), and the United States (1.6 per cent in 2021).

This ethnic community also has high rates of home and business ownership, as well as participation in education and community activities, which means that political decisions in the country have tangible, immediate consequences for their lives. Conversely, their active engagement in the social lives, substantial long-term settlement, and economic success provide them with a knowledge base in New Zealand politics; more importantly, the confidence to reach out and seek to be more involved in the country's mainstream civil life. One symbolic indicator of citizens' development of civil life is their participation in elections. Therefore, this ethnic community's participation in voting plays a vital role in

influencing New Zealand’s political landscape, policy-making, and, more frankly, the electoral politics and results. For example, as Auckland is the biggest city and economic centre of the country, and has the highest concentration of Chinese population in New Zealand, in key Auckland electorates such as Botany, Northcote, Mount Roskill, Epsom, and Upper Harbour, ignoring this bloc is a risk no major party can afford.

Against this backdrop, Dr Andrew Zhu, Director of Trace Research, initiated and conducted six major election-cycle surveys capturing the political preferences of New Zealand’s Chinese voters. This is the only continuous dataset of its kind in the country, covering a few key aspects that would considerably influence the general electoral result, such as party preference, leadership choice, voter turnout, and the issues that matter most to voters. The series begins in 2017 with a recall baseline to 2014, continues with two waves in 2020, and concludes with two waves in 2023. These surveys were not only about measuring voting intention before the general election but also about understanding the values, concerns, and priorities shaping Chinese voters’ decisions. The objectives were to:

- Build an evidence-based picture of political engagement within the community.
- Identify changes over time in party and leadership preferences.
- Highlight the issues most likely to influence voting behaviour.
- Offer insights that might help strengthen the community representation and policy responsiveness.

2. Voter Turnout: The Unseen Power of Consistency

Contrary to the common assumption that migrant or ethnic communities are politically disengaged, and that first-generation migrants face structural or experiential barriers to participation, the data demonstrate the opposite. Chinese voter turnout has consistently matched or exceeded national averages.

Year	Chinese Voters (%)	National Average (%)
2014 recall	78.5	76.8
2017	78.8	79.0
2020	79.5	81.5

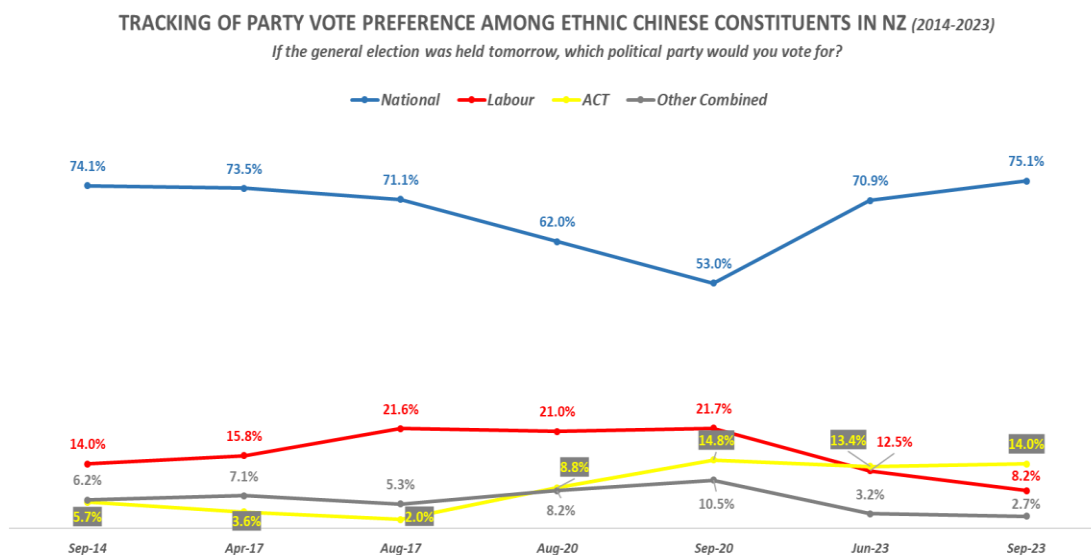
Table 1. Voter Turnout 2014–2020: Chinese Voters vs National Average

These are not one-off spikes; they are sustained participation rates across three election cycles. Part of the explanation lies in deeply ingrained cultural values, such as Confucian traditions that emphasise obligation and civic responsibility. Secondly, having many new Chinese migrants come from systems where their vote either did not exist or made little difference, their participation in the central government election in New Zealand carries a sense of gratitude and signals achievement and belonging to society. Lastly, the ballot system in New Zealand holds real weight; therefore, participation and decisions at the ballot box often mean the well-being of whole families, especially children and grandchildren. It is worth noting that turnout is not just high; it is also consistent, and in tight electorates, that consistency can really tip the scales.

3. Party Vote Trends: The Big Blue Lane

Over the past decade, National has been the dominant political choice for Chinese voters, rarely falling below 50% support – even during Labour’s 2020 landslide victory. This consistency is not surprising and often derives from the effect of country-of-origin contexts, where economic security is regarded as an important priority for individuals, families, and society. Chinese, therefore, often gravitate to right-leaning parties. National’s policy feeds this priority well, offering economic security, fiscal discipline, and pro-business policies, along with a focus on property stability – an issue of particular importance given high home ownership rates within the community.

Figure 1. Party Vote Trends 2014–2023: NZ Chinese Voters’ Preferences by Election Cycle



Year	National (%)	Labour (%)	ACT (%)	Other Combined (%)	Notes
2014 Sep	74.1	14	5.7	6.2	Baseline
2017 Apr	73.5	15.8	3.6	7.1	Pre-Ardern
2017 Aug	71.1	21.6	2.0	5.3	Post-Ardern surge
2020 Aug	62.0	21.0	8.8	8.2	Pre-election
2020 Sep	53.0	21.7	14.8	10.5	Labour's COVID halo
2023 Jun	70.9	12.5	13.4	3.2	Cost of living & crime
2023 Sep	75.1	8.2	14	2.7	Peak National, Labour low

Table 2. Party Vote Trends 2014–2023: NZ Chinese Voters' Preferences by Election Cycle

The preference for National among the Chinese community is also linked to the party's strong belief in meritocracy, a key principle in Confucian societies. Although the detailed manifestations of meritocracy in Confucian and Western contexts differ, a resource redistribution system built on merit-based criteria in Western democratic societies closely matches the idea of meritocracy in Chinese culture, where social and economic status should be allocated according to personal achievement rather than social inequality. This belief is contrary to post-materialism, which often underpins the principles of left-wing parties. Most importantly, policies perceived as threatening asset stability tend to generate immediate concern.

ACT's growth – from single digit to the mid-teens - reflects similar values: while smaller government, reduced regulation, and greater personal autonomy in business are addressed by its policy, law and order and security are key advocates. As an ethnic minority group, Chinese people feel a perpetual sense of vulnerability; therefore, they regard ACT's advocacy for personal security and law and order as an effective form of protection. In 2023, cost-of-living (71.7%) and law-and-order (65.3%) concerns aligned almost perfectly with the messages of both the National and ACT parties, producing the most decisive centre-right consolidation of the decade. By September 2023, women were more likely to support National (77.7%) than men (71.5%). ACT polled strongest among voters aged 50–64 (31.2%), while National's peak support came from voters aged 65+. Older voters and women remain National's core base; ACT's growth potential lies with mid-aged, entrepreneurial voters.

Based on the survey results, three stories stand out: 1) “Jacindamania” in 2017 reshaped the national political landscape but barely dented National’s Chinese support; 2) High satisfaction with pandemic management did not result in a Labour surge in 2020; and 3) Crime and inflation concerns aligned perfectly with centre-right messaging in 2023, producing the strongest rightward shift in ten years among Chinese community.

These key messages lead to a recommendations. For National, the challenge is to deliver on promises to retain this loyalty. Labour must rebuild credibility on economic and law-and-order issues, while ACT can continue expanding its base among business-oriented voters seeking deregulation and personal responsibility.

4. Leadership Preference: Competence Over Charisma

When it comes to leadership, Chinese voters consistently prefer competent managers over charismatic personalities. In cultural logic, leaders should be 稳重 (steady), 有担当 (responsible), and 务实 (pragmatic). Focus on business and/or governance experience are/is valued as proof of capability. Therefore, National is consistently viewed as the preferred Leader of the country by the Chinese community throughout the decade. This is why, although Jacinda Ardern’s warmth and international profile are celebrated nationally, such a high regard did not outweigh economic and law-and-order concerns within the Chinese community.

Leadership preference data over time shows this emphasis clearly:

Year	Preferred Leader (%)	Second choice (%)	Third choice (%)
2017 Apr	Bill English 45.7	Andrew Little 8.6	Winston Peters 3.1
2017 Aug	Bill English 58.5	Jacinda Ardern 20.1	Winston Peters 2.7
2020 Aug	Judith Collins 52.2	Jacinda Ardern 26.5	David Seymour 4.2
2023 Jun	Christopher Luxon 71.6	David Seymour 12.4	Chris Hipkins 9.8
2023 Sep	Christopher Luxon 74.2	David Seymour 12.7	Chris Hipkins 7.7

Table 3. Leadership Preferences among NZ Chinese Voters, 2017–2023

5. Issue Priorities Over Time: A Shifting, Pragmatic Mix

The trajectory of Chinese voter priorities from 2017 to 2023 reflects a pragmatic, adaptive political outlook rooted in both lived experience and enduring cultural values. This can be seen through four aspects:

1) Housing affordability (69.6% wanted government intervention) and safety (31.5% felt it had worsened) in 2017 are at the top of the Chinese voters' priority list of issues for concern. This trend links to the belief that one must first secure a stable home and a safe environment before pursuing prosperity 安居乐业.

2) While satisfaction with the COVID-19 response was high (74.7%), Chinese voters strongly supported the End-of-Life Choice Act (82%+) and opposed cannabis legalisation (80%+) in 2020. This pairing reveals a balance between openness to individual dignity in terminal illness and caution against perceived social disorder.

3) When the global economic recession occurs after the pandemic, cost of living (71.7%), crime (65.3%), and economic growth/jobs (63.5%) topped the list in June 2023. These issues are essentially interrelated. Inflation and crime are viewed as twin threats to both household budgets and community stability.

4) In September 2023, National's tax plan was preferred by 76.3% versus Labour's 7%, 60.1% supported a four-year parliamentary term, and 87% opposed lowering the voting age to 16. As can be seen, practical governance reforms are welcome, but shifts that could destabilise political norms are resisted.

Across the decade, these shifting priorities demonstrate that Chinese voters remain highly responsive to the immediate policy environment, yet anchored by values that prize stability, security, and long-term prosperity. Political parties that recognise and address this combination of pragmatic adaptation and cultural consistency are more likely to build durable support.

6. Referendums & Policy Questions: Where Values Show

Polling across 2020 and 2023 illustrates how these values translate into clear positions on key policy questions, often with margins far greater than the national averages. The details are shown below.

1) The End of Life Choice Act obtained 83.9% support and 12.4% oppose from the Chinese community in August 2020. Both percentages fluctuated slightly, with 82.2% supporting and 13.5% opposing in September 2020. They are opposed to the National referendum, which was 65.1% in favour. These statistics reflect a strong endorsement of individual autonomy and dignity in end-of-life decisions.

2) Cannabis Legalisation obtained 82.3% oppose, 13.7% support from the Chinese community in August 2020, and had a slight fluctuation to 80.2% oppose, 15.4% support in September 2020. The National referendum is 50.7% opposed. These figures highlight a more conservative stance on social order and family protection (守住底线 - “holding the moral bottom line”). It is worth mentioning that China has very restrictive laws towards drug use, and drug sale will result in a death sentence. The context of the country of origin provides an attitudinal inertia when Chinese vote.

3) As for immigration policy, especially the highly contested parent reunification policy, 59.1% Chinese voters said a fair parental reunification pathway is necessary, while only 15.9% say it's unnecessary in June 2023. The strong support for parent reunification policy has a strong cultural trait – filial piety 孝顺, in which being together with elderly parents for ageing care is a key manifestation of this important cultural value.

4) As regard to political Representation, 69% believe Chinese political Representation is undervalued, while only 12% disagree in June 2023. Unlike Chinese migrants in the early 20th century who intended to be low-key and only focus on survival. Thus political Representation was not even a willing choice in their minds, new Chinese migrants intend to be proactively engaged in politics and even contesting elections. Unfortunately, their enthusiasm for political Representation is not well reflected in reality. Despite more Chinese candidates contesting elections, Cabinet-level Representation remains scarce, fuelling perceptions that electoral support is not matched by political influence.

5) About electoral reform, which suggests extending the interval between two elections from three years to four years, 60.1% support a four-year term, while 20.4% oppose in the Chinese community in September 2023. As for voting age, 87% oppose lowering it to 16; only 9.3% support it. These results suggest openness to governance reforms that enhance stability but resistance to those seen as undermining political maturity.

Taken together, these statistics form a coherent worldview – that is, support for responsible personal freedoms, rejection of changes that could erode social stability, and a strong emphasis on family integrity and fair Representation.

7. Conclusion: A Voice That Counts

To summarise, Chinese voters are loyal but not uncritical, pragmatic yet values-driven, and consistently present at the ballot box. Their choices blend Confucian values, migrant experiences, economic pragmatism, and intergenerational responsibility.

With Chinese New Zealanders making up around 5.6% of the national population - and an even greater proportion in key urban electorates, this is a constituency whose voter turnout consistently exceeds or matches the national average, and is markedly higher than some other ethnic groups. This combination of size, concentration, and reliability makes them a critical segment in shaping electoral outcomes.

Ignoring these drivers risks alienating a bloc that can tip the balance in closely contested seats. Continued, authentic engagement - built on recognising their economic priorities, community safety concerns, and strong intergenerational focus - can secure one of the most reliable and high-turnout constituencies in the country for years to come.

“In politics, there are noisy voters, and there are reliable voters. The Chinese vote is quieter - but far more powerful than many realise. This decade of data proves it.”

Note: Methodology

This report draws on six waves of original polling conducted by Trace Research between 2014 and 2023, spanning four general election cycles (2014 recall, 2017, 2020, and 2023). Together, these surveys constitute the only continuous, decade-long dataset tracking the political attitudes and voting behaviour of New Zealand's Chinese community.

Each survey wave achieved a sample size exceeding 1,000 respondents, providing a robust statistical foundation for subgroup analysis by age, gender, migration cohort, income, region, and length of residence in New Zealand. With sample sizes of this scale, the margin of error for each wave is approximately $\pm 3\%$ at the 95% confidence level, assuming a simple random sample.

Data were collected exclusively online via the New Zealand Chinese Research Panel — a purpose-built national panel established by Trace Research to capture the diversity of ethnic Chinese communities in Aotearoa. The panel includes participants originating from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, and other diaspora backgrounds, encompassing both first-generation migrants and multi-generational New Zealand-born Chinese. This diversity allows for analysis across migration waves, language preferences, and settlement experiences. Surveys were administered bilingually (English and simplified/traditional Chinese), allowing respondents to complete questionnaires in their preferred language. This approach reduces linguistic exclusion bias and improves response validity among participants with varying levels of English proficiency.

To enhance representativeness, data were weighted post-collection to align with official census benchmarks for age, gender, and regional distribution within the national Chinese population. Where relevant, additional calibration was applied to reflect known demographic proportions in key urban electorates with significant Chinese populations. The questionnaire design combined standardised electoral measures (party vote intention, leader preference, turnout behaviour) with issue salience-tracking and policy-evaluation modules. Core tracking questions were retained across waves to enable longitudinal comparison. At the same time, topical modules were adapted to reflect the political context of each election cycle (e.g., COVID-19 management in 2020, cost of living and crime in 2023).

The research was conducted independently and was not commissioned, funded, or influenced by any political party, candidate, or advocacy group. All findings reflect aggregated, anonymised responses and comply with standard research ethics and data privacy practices.

While online panel research may carry inherent limitations — including self-selection bias and digital access considerations — the high civic engagement and internet penetration rates within the Chinese New Zealand community mitigate these risks. Longitudinal consistency across waves further strengthens the reliability of observed trends.

For a detailed technical appendix, including sampling framework, weighting procedures, and questionnaire instruments, please visit the Trace Research website.

About the Authors

Dr Andrew Zhu is a business, political, and social research specialist with over 20 years of experience across academia, public policy, and industry. He founded New Zealand's first dedicated Chinese research panel and leads the country's only decade-long longitudinal dataset tracking Chinese voter behaviour across multiple general elections. His political research examines how migration experiences and core values—such as stability, intergenerational responsibility, economic security, and civic obligation—shape political behaviour. Dr Zhu has also served as a political analyst for major national polling projects commissioned by mainstream media. His work combines methodological rigour, longitudinal insight, and cultural fluency to support evidence-based understanding of migrant political participation. Over the past decade, he has conducted more than 40 large-scale studies involving over 30,000 Asian and Chinese migrants, covering sectors including financial services, public opinion, safety perception, media consumption, health and wellbeing, cross-border e-commerce, education, tourism, and retirement planning etc..

Dr Liangni Sally Liu is a Professor in the School of Public Policy and Administration at Nanchang University and an internationally recognised scholar of transnational migration, ethnic relations, overseas Chinese communities, and public health. She was previously a tenured Associate Professor at Massey University in New Zealand. Her research spans China–New Zealand relations, migrant integration, diaspora political participation, and social inequality. She has published over 30 peer-reviewed journal articles and two books with Routledge, including *New Chinese Immigrants in New Zealand: Floating Families* (2022) and *Chinese Transnational Migration in the Age of Global Modernity* (2018). Dr Liu's work has been supported by competitive grants, including a Marsden Fund (Fast-Start) Award and a Health Research Council grant. She currently serves as Associate Editor of *International Migration Review* and sits on the editorial boards of *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* and *Journal of Chinese Overseas*.

Together, Dr Zhu and Dr Liu bring complementary expertise in quantitative electoral tracking and qualitative migration scholarship, offering a rare integration of political data analysis and a deep understanding of migrant behaviour and values.