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Rebranding the Right: Political Baggage and the Redefinition of Party Identity

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Abstract

Following repeated defeats at the ballot box, parties of a range of political hues in established democracies have seized on the rhetoric of modernization in recent years. In particular, parties have sought to ‘rebrand’ themselves in order to publicly signify a definitive break with the failures associated with their previous periods in office. In this paper I examine how the centre-right National Party in New Zealand attempted to overcome its electoral weaknesses during a period of Labour Party dominance through a process of *identity bricolage* to redefine its party brand. Rather than simply a marketing gimmick, the paper explores how the rebranding strategies of the main centre-right party in New Zealand served to help realign the party’s core policy positions with voters’ preferences. The paper concludes that, similar to several other countries, political parties in New Zealand are actively seeking to elide more traditional battle lines of electoral competition and are embracing a more personalized political leadership style – centered around competing claims to competence on valence issues – in reaction to increased public scepticism towards grand projects for political change in a post-neoliberal era.

Introduction

According to conventional wisdom, political parties in opposition do not win elections: incumbent parties in government lose them. Despite the clear continuing salience of this adage, in recent years opposition parties of a range of political hues in established democracies have placed a strong emphasis on ‘party modernization’ in order to re-connect with the voting public in the hope of increasing their vote share at subsequent elections. For broad-church parties that aim to win an election outright in majoritarian systems, or which seek to translate their share of the vote into the largest possible number of government posts in a coalition government in a proportional representation system, this process of ‘party renewal’ is often complicated by the political baggage a major party carries from a previous period in office (Buckler and Dolowitz, 2009; Kelly, 2003). In cases where a major political party has been thrown out of government – and especially in instances where the party continues to lose consecutive elections – common explanations of the drop in voter support often hinge on a failure of parties to effectively put past political controversies behind them.

Parties therefore face a continuing electoral drag if the symbolic value of their public identity – or party brand – remains weighed down with past political baggage. Illustrative examples of this phenomenon include the UK Conservative Party’s association with allegations of ‘Tory sleaze’ and the ‘cash for questions’ scandal of the mid-1990s, the association of the Australian Labor Party with an economic contraction in the early 1990s that then Treasurer Paul Keating infamously described as the recession Australia ‘had to have’, or, more recently, US Congressional Republicans’ association with an unpopular president and continued support for America’s military intervention in Iraq. However, an important distinction can be made between the taint of past political scandals such as ‘cash for questions’, which might gradually be passively overcome as the high profile individuals involved leave parliament and are removed from the public eye, and the common association of a major party with the unpopular policy positions of a previous government. Without deliberate action to address prior sources of discontent, the latter may remain entrenched in the public imagination, not least because voters may be regularly reminded of a party’s unpopular past government decisions and policy positions through the style of media coverage of parties’ respective manifestos in subsequent election campaigns.

A party’s policy track record from a previous period in government often remains a convenient template that political observers and media commentators, as well as competing parties, may refer to in order to assess whether an opposition party is, once again, ‘fit to govern’. To the extent that this may serve to symbolically reaffirm the link between a particular party and its past political ‘failures’, and hence remind a significant number of voters why they decided to

eject the party from government in the first place, past controversies can remain a proverbial albatross around the neck of a party's new leaders. In response to the electoral challenges that a strong continuing association with past political controversies generates, parties in established democracies have increasingly turned to expert consultants, opinion poll data, and focus group research to provide the raw materials for rebuilding, or, less substantively, repackaging, their 'party brand' to increase the public appeal of their policy platform (Savigny, 2007). It is particularly debilitating for parties when they gain a reputation from an earlier stint in government for being overly 'ideological', at least when this is out of step with the balance of public opinion (see, for example, Bale, 2006). For contemporary centre-right parties, the political problem can be especially acute when they are identified with socially harmful or 'unfair' policies. This can be illustrated by the characterization of the UK Conservatives as the 'nasty party' (Davies, 2002), or the Howard government's support for the 2006 WorkChoices legislation that was publicly perceived as stripping Australian workers of core employment rights (Bongiorno, 2008: 599). A further example is the blanket association of the New Zealand National Party with the 'bad old days' of neoliberal reform during the 1990s, which the New Zealand Labour Party, while in government from 1999 to 2008, was often able to exploit by claiming that re-electing a National government would lead to the introduction of a new round of radical and destabilizing economic policy reforms that would be paid for with cuts to public services (see Broome, 2006, 2008).

This paper focuses on the example of the New Zealand National Party to examine how centre-right parties may seek to 'rebrand' themselves in order to publicly signify a definitive break with the failures associated with their previous period in office. In particular, the paper aims to identify the contemporary avenues through which 'rebranding' may occur, and to explore the political dynamics that are likely to be most salient in determining the success or failure of party rebranding strategies. The paper proceeds as follows. First, I define how the 'rebranding' of party identity is understood for the purposes of this paper, and how rebranding relates to the distinct concept of 'political marketing'. Second, I briefly review the literature on party politics and political change to examine why party rebranding may have gained greater political salience in the contemporary era. Here I also borrow from the comparative political economy literature on institutional change to introduce the concept of 'identity bricolage' to the study of party modernization strategies, which can help to illuminate how the process of party rebranding can gradually take place without necessarily indicating a substantive departure from core party principles. Third, I provide an overview of the dynamics of contemporary policy contests among the two major political parties in New Zealand, which share a striking degree of similarity with

policy debates in other established democracies that underwent a process of rapid neoliberal reform in the 1980s and 1990s before partly shifting back toward a more ‘social democratic’ policy orientation. Fourth, I examine the process of rebranding that the National Party gradually underwent after losing the 1999 New Zealand election to the Labour Party. The paper concludes by arguing that, while voters’ perceptions of a government’s performance (and government longevity) remains one of the principal determinants of election outcomes, opposition party rebranding efforts play an important secondary role in electoral politics. In particular, high profile party rebranding exercises can enable voters to feel comfortable enough to ‘take a punt’ on electing a new government if an opposition is able to close the gap between public perceptions of its brand identity and voters’ degree of tolerance for the policy risks inherent in a change in government.

Political baggage and the rebranding of party identity

If they succeed in effectively communicating clear signals to both core and potential supporters, party brands provide voters with cues that may help to consolidate public backing for a party’s agenda across a range of different policy domains (see Tomz and Sniderman, 2004). Any political party is in big trouble if it becomes commonplace for voters, when quizzed about their party preferences by pollsters or political journalists, to respond that they no longer know what a particular party stands for. To guard against this possibility, party managers and political consultants tend to place a strong emphasis on the need to build up a distinctive and readily identifiable political brand for a particular party, and to aggressively market the party’s brand well before the official start of an election campaign. Equally damaging, however, is the popular identification of a party with a brand that has passed its use-by date and which continues to carry heavy political baggage, a perception that can potentially persist long after a party has undergone significant internal reorganization, policy reformulation, and turnover of key personnel (see Bale, 2008).

To win an election from opposition, broad-church political parties seek to present themselves as a credible ‘government-in-waiting’ in order to alleviate the insecurities voters may have about shifting from a familiar set of political leaders into unknown terrain. In the absence of a national crisis that might help opposition parties to win power by de-legitimizing the credentials of the incumbent government, in order to gain the advantage in public debate and media commentary about political alternatives the onus tends to remain firmly centered on opposition parties to demonstrate that the country will be safe under their stewardship. A further trick for the opposition is to be able to articulate a compelling rationale for *why* a change in government is

politically necessary. In adversarial political systems like the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, a tried-and-tested strategy for opposition parties to motivate voters to eject an incumbent government is the simple argument that it is ‘time for a change’. Once a government has won a series of election victories, and has piled up the inevitable political baggage that goes hand-in-hand with an extended period in office, voters may be more open to the possibility of being persuaded to vote for an alternative party and for a fresh set of faces to take the political helm. Yet in the absence of a meltdown by the incumbent government opposition parties must still succeed in presenting a *credible* alternative to the public – at least in order to be seen to ‘win the campaign’ – as the election of Kevin Rudd’s Australian Labor Party demonstrated in 2007 (Bongiorno, 2008).

Public perceptions about party brands tend to be ‘sticky’ (Bale, 2008: 271). Party *rebranding*, as the term is used here, can be distinguished both from political marketing in general and from election campaigning. Political marketing can be understood as the adaption by political organizations of ‘business-marketing concepts and techniques to help them achieve their goals’ (Lees-Marshment, 2001), whereas official election campaigns are necessarily of a short duration. This paper adopts a basic definition of party rebranding strategies as the *deliberate efforts to redefine a party’s public identity in an attempt to improve its integrity with voters*, which aim in particular at restoring public credibility in a party following the accumulation of significant political baggage from a previous stint in office. Party identity – the focal point for rebranding exercises – is understood here as distinct from the formal structure of party organizations and their particular institutional characteristics (cf. Kelly, 2003), and also as separate to the ‘ideological identity’ that provides a party’s moral *raison d’etre* (Buckler and Dolowitz, 2009: 13). Reforms to a party’s institutional identity, its ideological identity, and its brand identity may each form an integral component of a comprehensive ‘modernization’ process. In this paper, brand identity is defined as the common set of symbolic associations between a party and its headline policy positions that voters rely on as information shortcuts to inform their electoral preferences, which tend to be reinforced and stabilized through mainstream media analysis of political issues and public debate. In comparison with a party’s institutional identity or its ideological identity, therefore, to a much greater extent a party’s brand identity is ‘public property’, and parties tend to have less direct influence in practice over how this is shaped.

The term ‘rebranding’ is specifically used to refer to the strategies that parties undertake *prior* to the start of an official election campaign to re-articulate their identity through signalling substantive policy shifts in key areas (most often in policy areas where a party was previously associated with unpopular positions). Rebranding must take place before official campaigning in

order to ensure that a newly-defined brand identity is already familiar to – and positively resonates with – the public, which may subsequently be confirmed or rejected by voters during a campaign but requires more time than a typical election campaign to become established. In short, if a party rebranding exercise has not been completed and a party's public identity successfully redefined prior to the start of an official election campaign, it is highly unlikely to be effective before the subsequent election.

Whereas political marketing refers to some of the techniques or tactics that parties may utilize to inform a rebranding exercise, the culmination of which will then be put to the test during an election campaign, party rebranding more specifically forms part of the broader political strategy that a party may develop in an effort to regain office. Moreover, rebranding is primarily focused on drawing a line under lasting negative perceptions of a party, and articulating a new public identity that is more aligned with voter preferences. This has echoes of Downs' (1957) 'median voter' theory, but party rebranding – as it is defined here – need not involve increased policy convergence between two vote-maximizing major parties. Instead, there are a number of alternative policy routes that parties can and do take in an effort to sterilize the legacy of their previously unpopular reputation in a given issue area (cf. Blyth, 1997).

Party brands and political change

The aim here is not to suggest that the rebranding of major parties has become the principal determinant of election outcomes in established democracies, substituting, for example, for voters' assessment of an incumbent government's performance and fundamental contests over 'bread and butter' issues. Nevertheless, there are at least four important political dynamics that might suggest that the effective brand management of party identities has recently become a more salient factor in electoral competition across a range of different countries. First, the increasing focus on, and the resources devoted to, party branding in a range of countries in recent years has occurred in the wake of evidence suggesting that the proportion of voters that express clear partisan attachments – and the strength and stability of those attachments – has decreased (Mair, 2006: 40-43; cf. Rogers, 2005). The decline of 'tribal politics' suggests that broad-church parties face greater incentives to adopt new means of engaging with the public, in order to ensure that their policy agenda is clearly communicated to 'swing voters' and core supporters are effectively mobilized.

Second, a process of 'de-industrialization' in many western countries has been associated in the party politics literature with a decline in the relevance of 'left/right' social cleavages with respect to political mobilization and voter preferences (cf. Dalton, 2009). In 'post-industrial'

democracies, existing evidence suggests that parties must now compete on a much more complex and variegated range of issue dimensions, at least in order to appeal to the growing number of voters who are employed in the service sector or those in export-orientated industries (Hellwig, 2008: 703). This may enhance the salience of political issues such as climate change, criminal justice policy, immigration, and foreign policy that cannot simply be slotted into a left/right matrix (as New Labour's record on some of these issues might suggest, cf. Leggett, 2007: 11-12). In such circumstances party rebranding strategies may be utilized in an attempt to neutralize traditional negative public perceptions about a party's policy orientation (such as the idea that the UK Labour Party is traditionally 'soft' on crime).

The third key factor that might suggest that party branding strategies have gained in importance in recent years is the putative emergence of a neoliberal consensus on economic policy, concomitant with a comparative decline in ideological debate and political contestation over 'big ideas' with respect to macroeconomic frameworks among parties of different political hues across a number of countries (cf. Crouch, 1997). In short, major political parties in some countries are now viewed as having relatively less 'clear blue water' between their preferences with respect to key components of macroeconomic policy than previously. This may be particularly true of major parties in 'liberal market economies' such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand (see Hall and Soskice, 2001), where economic policies such as floating exchange rates, open capital and current accounts, liberal trade regimes, inflation targeting, and central bank independence now receive strong bipartisan support. Yet with the emergence of broad cross-party support for the mainstays of a country's macroeconomic framework, party brands may have become more salient than ideological appeals on the basis of substantive differences in economic policy orientation in competition for votes, due to the lack of policy alternatives on offer.

This leads to a fourth important factor that can be identified which might suggest the increased salience of rebranding strategies: the growing prominence of valence issues, areas where different political parties may espouse the same policy goals – which have strong appeal to voters – but compete over their claims to be competent to deliver on these shared goals (Green and Holbolt, 2008: 462). In this respect, the outcomes of political contests over valence issues are influenced primarily by how voters' collectively rate the competence level of different parties to deliver on a common objective in a given issue area. While the increasing prominence of 'managerial politics' over 'ideological politics' has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years (cf. Blyth and Katz, 2005), due in large part to the assumed decline in traditional left/right contests over macroeconomic policy choices, a successful party brand for competence

on valence issues where major parties do not offer voters different policy options must be painstakingly constructed, and can quickly be degraded by political mistakes or when events simply spiral out of control (especially in the case of parties in government).

If the combination of these four political changes in the dynamics of party competition – declining partisan attachments, de-industrialization, a new consensus on macroeconomic policy settings, and the increased salience of valence issues – suggest that party brands have gained in importance across established democracies, how can we conceptualize the process through which party rebranding is achieved? While political marketing approaches tend to focus on applying business-marketing models to understand how parties seek to package their ideas (Lees-Marshment, 2001), this paper proposes that party rebranding strategies can be comprehended through borrowing from the comparative political economy literature on ‘institutional bricolage’. *Bricolage* can be understood as an innovative process of experimentation, whereby actors recombine existing institutional components such as specific principles and practices to produce institutional change (Campbell, 2004: 69).

Conceiving party rebranding as a process of bricolage involves a recognition that the redefinition of a durable party identity – one which is acknowledged and is accepted as credible by voters – must be founded on the range of symbolic resources that party actors in a particular social context already have at their disposal (cf. Bourdieu, 1991: 166). For instance, the concept of ‘identity bricolage’ refers to the process through which new behavioral habits emerge as an institution evolves, whereby the components of actors’ professional identities are recombined to produce new identities associated with different role expectations (Carruthers and Uzzi, 2000). For political parties, a process of renewal through identity bricolage may involve the recombination of the different components of a party’s brand identity in order to more closely align existing party principles with public expectations and voters’ policy preferences. Therefore, rather than constructing a new party brand in a social vacuum unconstrained by the legacy of a particular party’s history, parties can be expected to engage in a process of policy recombination by adapting their existing principles to match voters’ new expectations and to pursue a new set of policy goals in response to changing circumstances.

The concept of bricolage thus incorporates an understanding of the structural constraints within which political entrepreneurs must act, but without presenting actors as lacking the creative capacity to intentionally transform and experiment with the structural arrangements that they inherit (Campbell, 1998: 382). This suggests that parties will gradually seek to make sense of changed political circumstances by relating them as much as possible to their previous policy positions, and will therefore utilize the existing party principles they have at hand because these

already appear as rational tools to use to fashion a strategic response to a decline in voter support or the loss of office. Conceived as a process of identity bricolage, party rebranding is not about wholesale change. But nor is it simply a superficial matter of fashioning a new rhetorical style to ‘tell voters what they want to hear’. Rather, from this perspective party rebranding, while centred on the deliberate re-articulation of existing party principles in response to new political conditions, has direct consequences for future party actions (especially if a party subsequently wins office) because it serves to define the policy limits within which a party has room to manoeuvre before its public credibility will be significantly eroded. As the following case study of the New Zealand National Party illustrates, this process of party rebranding through identity bricolage is particularly important for parties that seek to shed the political baggage they accumulated through a previous period in office.

Policy contests in contemporary New Zealand

The parameters of contemporary policy contests in New Zealand continue to reflect the legacy of a decade and a half of rapid and destabilizing policy change after 1984 (for an overview, see Schwartz, 1991; Aberbach and Christensen, 2001; Reardon and Gray, 2007). New Zealand governments under the centre-left Labour Party during 1984 to 1990 and the centre-right National Party from 1990 to 1999 pursued radical programs of neoliberal economic reform that represented a critical break with the country’s past. The pace of economic reform was particularly intense during the nine-year period between the 1984 election and the 1993 election, when the country voted to introduce a mixed-member proportional (MMP) representation system to replace the longstanding first-past-the-post electoral system.

To applause from the world’s financial markets and international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (Broome and Seabrooke, 2007: 586-7), the fourth Labour government that won office in 1984 quickly moved New Zealand from being one of the most ‘closed’ market economies in the world to becoming one of the world’s most open liberal market economies, which was often held up as a model of rapid neoliberal economic policy reform for other states to follow. One of the key figures driving economic reforms during this period was Labour’s finance minister Roger Douglas (see Aberbach and Christensen, 2001: 415-6), whose policy program and trenchant views on the economic ‘medicine’ the country needed to swallow were commonly termed ‘Rogernomics’. Following the meltdown of the fourth Labour government and Labour’s subsequent rout at the 1990 election, the National Party held power through a series of majority and minority administrations until Labour was re-elected to government in 1999. In contrast to the National Party’s traditional policy conservatism, however,

this period of National government initially involved a further intensification of neoliberal policy reforms during 1990 to 1992 spearheaded by finance minister Ruth Richardson. Her set of far-reaching labour market, housing, state ownership, and social policy changes, popularly termed 'Ruthanasia', prompted widespread public discontent at the breach of National's pre-election promises and its uncharacteristically radical approach to state-driven economic change, and served to strengthen public support for major changes to the electoral system to constrain the capacity of future governments to drive through rapid policy changes against popular opposition (James, 1998: 20-1).

A number of other liberal market economies underwent similar processes of external liberalization and international integration during the 1980s and 1990s, including both the United Kingdom and Australia. Yet New Zealand's experience was distinctive on at least three fronts: (1) reforms were generally more extensive than in other developed economies; (2) changes were introduced much more rapidly than elsewhere, in part due to the country's previous 'winner takes all' electoral system, a unicameral political system, and a tradition of strict party discipline; and (3) economic liberalization in New Zealand more closely reflected the wholesale adoption of neoclassical economic models (Goldfinch, 1998). Despite the far-reaching nature of New Zealand's economic reforms, however, the country subsequently failed to realize the expected level of improvement in aggregate economic outcomes, at least when compared with other cases of reform such as Australia (Hazledine and Quiggin, 2006: 146).

The neoliberal policy activism of New Zealand governments during the 1980s and 1990s radically altered the country's 'cradle-to-grave' welfare state, and decreased the allocative role of the state in the economy in general. This generated extensive business failures as firms were allowed to 'go to the wall'. Combined with the prioritization of maintaining a tight monetary policy this helped to stimulate historically high levels of unemployment, which reached 10.5% in 1991 (Brook Cowen, 1998: 345, 348). Enacted in such a short period of time, these major policy changes combined to widen income inequality through the upward redistribution of income to the wealthiest members of New Zealand society. The downsizing of the state's role in the economy worsened the effects of reforms on the poor, with particularly negative consequences for employment levels, wages, and rates of home ownership (Rudd, 2005; Broome, 2008). For example, average per capita income declined in real terms for the bottom 10% of the population by 8.71% between 1983-4 and 1995-6, while the per capita income of the top 10% increased over the same period by 26.48% (Dalziel, 2002: 44).

Unsurprisingly, such drastic changes in income distribution and the role of the welfare state generated considerable public discontent. Two particularly important political consequences of

New Zealand's economic reforms – which did not feature to the same extent in either Australia or the UK – included the manifestation of 'reform fatigue' among voters, combined with a weakening of the social legitimacy of New Zealand's formal political processes (Goldfinch, 1998: 199-200). New Zealand's experience of neoliberal reforms thus contributed to a simultaneous decline of both the *input* (process) and *output* (outcome) legitimacy of the country's political system (Scharpf, 1999). The decline of 'input' legitimacy – after the policy track record of both major parties in government had frustrated voters' expectations – played an important part in consolidating the political constituency in favor of electoral reform in the early 1990s. Furthermore, with a majority of voters tiring of the costs associated with consecutive rounds of large-scale policy reforms by the second half of the 1990s, restoring 'output' legitimacy gradually became connected with a halt to macro-scale reform programs, and a return to electoral contests organized around alternative agendas for policy 'tinkering' rather than wholesale policy change.

Reflecting this shift in voters' political preferences, the triumph of Helen Clark's Labour Party at the polls in November 1999 came on the back of campaign promises to govern in the interests of social stability, rather than to introduce further radical economic policy changes. Nevertheless, the campaign promised some flagship policy corrections to the excesses of the economic reforms introduced under 'Rogernomics' and 'Ruthanasia'. Progressive policy shifts under the Labour-led minority coalition government from 1999 included a rise in the top rate of income tax from 33% to 39%, linking pensions to 65% of the average wage, and removing market rentals for social housing by linking rents to 25% of tenants' income.

In its first term the Labour-led government also abolished interest charges on student loans for the duration of tertiary study (with student loans subsequently made interest free following the 2005 election for graduates who remained in New Zealand), and passed industrial relations legislation that in theory reinstated some of the union rights that the National Party had abolished in the early 1990s (Bale, 2003: 205, 207). As a result of the shifting parameters of policy contests in New Zealand, and faced with a Labour-led government that was largely successful in closing the legitimacy gap between parties' election platforms and their subsequent actions in government, the National Party brand after 1999 remained burdened with significant political baggage. Overcoming the legacy of its past controversies required a protracted process of identity bricolage by party leaders, as well as the emergence of more fortuitous political circumstances, in order to improve the party's electoral prospects in a post-neoliberal era.

Rebranding the New Zealand National Party

During its third consecutive term in government from 1996 to 1999, the New Zealand National Party attempted the difficult process of implementing a rebranding exercise while still in office (in coalition with the self-defined ‘centre’ party New Zealand First). The main ingredient in this process was a change in leadership in late 1997. This involved a switch from then Prime Minister Jim Bolger, who had been the National Leader since 1986 and had led the party to an overwhelming election victory in 1990 as well as much more narrow victories in 1993 and in the first MMP election in 1996, to cabinet minister Jenny Shipley who had first entered Parliament in 1987 (Wood, 2005: 244).

Yet apart from the change in leadership, combined with a relative slowdown in the pace and scope of economic reforms, the National Party made little attempt to undertake a more thorough rebranding process. Instead, National began to find itself increasingly on the wrong side of public opinion on key positional issues such as privatization, tax cuts, and public spending priorities (Broome, 2006: 67-9). Furthermore, the change in leadership did little to help free the Shipley government from the significant political baggage the National Party brand had collected over three terms in office, not least because Shipley, as Social Welfare Minister in the early 1990s and later as Health Minister, had been responsible for implementing controversial cuts to state welfare benefits and neoliberal healthcare reforms that epitomized the dealignment of National’s policy priorities and voters’ preferences. Combined with political instability associated with the demise of the National–New Zealand First coalition in 1998 (Boston, *et al.*, 2004) and poor political management in the final months leading up to the 1999 election (Wood, 2005: 250), this mini-rebranding exercise was insufficient for National to avoid a subsequent election defeat.

During the party’s extended period of opposition for three parliamentary terms after 1999 (the first time the party had been out of government for more than two consecutive three-year terms since the Second World War), several important elements gradually coalesced to help improve the public identity of the National Party brand. These included: (1) generational change in the parliamentary party; (2) policy differentiation on issues where National was able to win the public argument; and (3) the transformation of a series of former positional issues that significantly disadvantaged National into valence issues. These linked processes of incremental change through identity bricolage began during the party’s first term in opposition from 1999 to 2002, but only fully came to fruition during the period following Labour’s third electoral victory from 2005 to 2008.

National underwent three leadership changes between losing office in 1999 and regaining power in 2008. Former Prime Minister Jenny Shipley was replaced as party leader by her former finance minister Bill English in 2001, who was subsequently replaced in 2003 after leading National to the lowest vote share in its history in the 2002 election (20.9% of the party vote) by his own finance spokesperson, former Reserve Bank Governor Don Brash. Despite almost gaining office in the 2005 election with 39.1% of the party vote compared with Labour's 41.1%, Don Brash was replaced by the National caucus in November 2006 in favor of newcomer John Key (Brash's finance spokesperson from 2006), formerly a foreign exchange manager for Merrill Lynch in London, who had only become a Member of Parliament in 2002.

Key's entry to Parliament in 2002 was part of a broad effort by successive party presidents John Slater (1998-2001), Michelle Boag (2001-2002), and Judy Kirk (from 2002) to attract star candidates in order to inject more 'fresh blood' into the National Party's ranks in Parliament (Bevan, 2005). One consequence of the shift from a majoritarian electoral system to MMP in New Zealand has been that political parties have been able to attract 'talented' individuals to stand for Parliament by offering them a fast-track route as party list candidates that do not have to gain office in an electorate constituency. Through accepting a high list ranking, candidates are effectively guaranteed a seat in Parliament (at least in the case of the two major parties). Key himself won a seat in Parliament after being parachuted in by party leaders over the incumbent MP to contest the safe National seat of Helensville. In contrast, a high list ranking was utilized in the 2002 election to ensure former Reserve Bank Governor Don Brash was elected to Parliament, and as a result of the greater centralization of candidate selection for the 2005 and, in particular, 2008 elections a number of National candidates gained office through the party's list vote (which rose at each subsequent election after the historic low of 2002), following a process of significant organizational reform in 2003. Among other things, reforms adopted in the wake of the party's disastrous result in the 2002 election served to strengthen the *de facto* control the party leadership could exercise over candidate selection to improve the quality and professionalization of both electoral candidates and the party list (Stephens, 2008: Ch. 5). As a result of the party's vigorous recruiting efforts, after the 2005 election the nomination of a younger and more ethnically-diverse cohort of MPs with a less uneven gender balance helped to modernize the public image of the party in the run-up to the 2008 election. This enabled the party's identity to move beyond the self-criticism voiced in an e-mail in 2004 by National MP and party strategist Murray McCully that the parliamentary party 'look[s] like a bunch of conservative, honky males in suits' (*The Dominion Post*, 2008).

Along with generational change in the National Party caucus more broadly, the election of parliamentary newcomer John Key to the leadership in late 2006 was an important milestone on the party's road back to power. Similar to other established democracies, New Zealand has experienced an increasing 'personalization' of party politics in recent years, with much greater attention paid to the qualities and individual style of party leaders (Miller, 2008: 260). While former Reserve Bank Governor Don Brash had largely succeeded in closing the poll gap between National and Labour during his tenure as leader from 2003 to 2006 through the adoption of strong policy positions on tax cuts and Maori 'separatism', John Key was able to more effectively draw a line under the party's political baggage from the 1990s (about which Brash, for clear ideological reasons, remained unapologetic).

For the National Party, which after two terms of Labour Party dominance still remained weighed down by its past political baggage from the 1990s, John Key was an ideal candidate to complete the rebranding of the party's public identity. Sometimes referred to as New Zealand's equivalent of David Cameron (Barrowclough, 2008), Key was described by the country's media from the start of his leadership as a natural 'centrist' and 'pragmatist', and is credited with exhibiting a relaxed form of political charisma (Berry, 2006). Despite being the New Zealand Parliament's richest MP (with an estimated wealth of more than NZ\$50,000,000), the narrative of Key's life that the National Party was able to effectively communicate to voters through the media was a 'rags-to-riches' story of a self-made man who had lived in social housing when he was growing up, raised by his Labour-leaning single-parent mother who had emigrated to New Zealand as an Austrian Jewish refugee, and had gone on to become a high-flying investment banker (Rapson, 2005). Key also developed a reputation as a politician prepared to take bold risks to engage voters' attention, which was illustrated by his early foray into Labour territory through a high-profile visit to a poor suburban street in Auckland to highlight the country's social problems that persisted under the Labour-led government (du Chateau, 2008). Key was particularly effective at categorically accepting core elements of Labour's social policy framework that were recognized as attracting strong public support (discussed further below). In this respect, Key was in part simply continuing a process begun by Bill English when, as leader from 2001 to 2003, he had begun to re-articulate National's policy positions towards what one observer described as 'progressive-conservatism' (James, 2002).

After a sustained period in the political wilderness, the National Party had begun to gain positive traction with voters during 2004 and 2005 through adopting a distinctive position in two major policy areas: tax policy and the legal status of indigenous Maori rights. Following Labour finance minister Michael Cullen's widely-ridiculed 'chewing gum budget' in May 2005 (which

proposed minor tax threshold changes that would only add about 67 cents to most workers' weekly wage packets), National gained a clear advantage over Labour on fiscal policy through proposing much more significant reductions to tax rates and thresholds in the 2005 election campaign (Broome, 2006: 70-1). Although National subsequently scaled down the scope of its tax cutting package, following a narrow Labour win in the 2005 election the tax issue was effectively owned by National. Together with the continuing high level of public support for tax cuts, this prompted Labour to subsequently introduce a more generous program of tax reductions in 2008 in an effort to claw back lost public support for its own 'targeted tax relief' approach to fiscal policy.

Furthermore, in the wake of a speech on nationhood and racial separatism by party leader Don Brash to the Orewa Rotary Club at the start of 2004, National also tapped into – as well as, arguably, stoking – public concern among Pakeha New Zealanders about 'special privileges' that Labour had allegedly granted to indigenous New Zealanders of Maori descent (see O'Sullivan, 2008). The issue of Maori rights was subsequently used as an effective 'wedge' issue in the 2005 election (where the National Party almost doubled its party vote from 2002). For example, in 2005 the National Party used billboards that employed a clear symbolic dualism to suggest that the National Party represented all 'mainstream' New Zealanders while Labour was captured by 'special interests', especially Maori. The right-hand side of one billboard featured the smiling face of Don Brash set against a blue background with the word 'Kiwi', while the left-hand side displayed a dour Helen Clark set against a red background with the word 'iwi' (referring to Maori tribal groupings) (Maddison, 2006). Taken together, these two positional issues helped National's attempts to redefine itself as being on the side of majority opinion on controversial issues, and to paint Labour as increasingly out of touch with public sentiment.

Finally, the National Party under John Key's leadership from November 2006 accepted core Labour policies which had achieved a significant level of public support, and which it had previously strongly opposed. In part, this was enabled by the construction of John Key's personal reputation as a political pragmatist not wedded to a particular ideology (du Chateau, 2008; cf. *Sunday Star Times*, 2008), a rather remarkable achievement given that Key had built his substantial wealth through currency market trading that was enabled by, and further contributed to, the diffusion of national neoliberal reforms and financial globalization. This pragmatic reputation allowed him to credibly sign up to support Labour policies that would have been difficult, or at least politically implausible, for former leader Don Brash. This included clearly signaling the party's support, at least for the duration of its first term in government, for retaining Kiwibank (a state-owned bank set up under the Labour-Alliance minority coalition

government in 2001), the Cullen superannuation fund (which invests public money to pre-fund future superannuation payments), public ownership of key national assets (such as Air New Zealand), KiwiSaver (a new savings scheme with tax credits to encourage employer and employee contributions), Working for Families (a system of supplementary social assistance benefits), and interest-free student loans. These policy shifts effectively transformed controversial positional issues into valence issues, at the same time as diminishing the Labour government's political advantage on the use of public funds in key spending areas. Precisely because these changes cut against the grain of National's policy orientation during its previous period in government, reducing voters' uncertainty over the future of popular policy programs also helped to demarcate the 'new' National brand from its (largely) discredited neoliberal reform agenda of the 1990s. As a result, by 2007 it was possible for political observers to claim that there was an increasing degree of policy consensus between John Key's National Party and Helen Clark's Labour-led government over major planks of social policy (Edwards, 2008: 1081; Miller, 2008: 260).

Against a backdrop of a rapidly deteriorating economy during 2008, New Zealand held a general election in November. The impact of the global credit crunch and the onset of recession in New Zealand spurred the two main political parties to enter into a bidding war by offering competing economic crisis management plans during the 2008 election campaign. In addition to phased tax cuts announced in the budget in May, the first stage of which took effect in October, the Labour Party outlined an economic stimulus package that would be implemented soon after the election if Labour was returned to power. The package was centered on speeding up infrastructure projects, such as school property upgrades and reforestation as well as road and rail construction developments, in order to increase jobs. In addition, Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark outlined new spending to retrain workers made redundant, while claiming that 'A curtain is being drawn down on the era of the free-wheeling unregulated money traders and financiers whose greed has shaken the international financial system to its core' (Young, 2008). In response, the National Party also announced increased spending on infrastructure projects and tax cuts, as well as a new temporary rescue package for workers made redundant that would provide 'transitory assistance' to help the newly unemployed continue to service their mortgage or pay rent (Armstrong 2008). Following a sustained period where the Labour Party had ranked well below National in most public opinion polls, the combined impact of the global credit crunch and the slowing housing market in New Zealand worked against the government (see Broome, 2009), and after nine years in power Labour lost the November election to the National Party, achieving only 34% of the party vote to National's 45%.

Drawing on this case study of the New Zealand National Party after 1999, party rebranding strategies can be broken down into the following four potential components:

1. The public transformation of previous contentious ‘positional issues’ into ‘valence issues’ in areas where the status quo receives strong public support.
2. Fostering generational change in the parliamentary party – ideally including the election of a leader who can credibly disavow responsibility for past controversies.
3. The use of leadership rhetoric, coupled with concrete policy development, to attenuate a party’s symbolic association with the political baggage from its last term in office.
4. The re-articulation of party policy on at least one major positional issue to clearly signal the alternative choices voters face.

These four components of a successful rebranding strategy differ from the four key imperatives of ideological renewal outlined by Buckler and Dolowitz (2009) because they relate more directly to change in the style and substance of a party’s articulation of its policy positions. This process is geared towards the goal of charting a more acceptable course of policy action, and thereby altering the political package that voters identify with a party’s brand. Party rebranding strategies can therefore be located more firmly in the foreground of policy debate compared with ideological renewal (see Campbell, 1998: 385), although both processes may often go hand-in-hand.

Party rebranding strategies alone are unlikely to be sufficient to alter an election campaign in the absence of a crisis of confidence in the government of the day. Rather, for rebranding to be successful, a party must be able to re-articulate its brand identity in fertile political conditions in order to gain voters’ attention, and for a new brand identity to be accepted as credible. In this respect, the following three broad ‘scope conditions’ can be identified that could be expected to determine whether opposition party rebranding strategies will be effective:

- a. Voters must be convinced that it is ‘time for a change’, a process which may depend heavily on the acceptance of this narrative by the mainstream media (as well as on government longevity).
- b. Voters must be persuaded that a party’s headline policy pledges are credible (with respect to both positional and valence issues).
- c. An opposition party needs to be able to win the argument on at least one key positional issue.

In the absence of an effective rebranding exercise (or a severe crisis of public confidence in the incumbent government), a party's past political baggage may continue to serve to keep it out of government. Possible examples of these circumstances might include the British elections in 1992 and 2005, the Australian election in 2004, or the New Zealand election in 2005. However, when these three scope conditions are present, this can help to open a window of opportunity for an opposition party to increase its share of the vote – if the party is able to successfully rebrand its public identity by closing the gap between its symbolic association with core policy positions and voters' preferences.

Conclusion

Party branding is about the social construction of political credibility. The rebranding process necessarily takes place in the intense glare of public scrutiny, even if much of the legwork goes on behind the scenes, which suggests that party rebranding must involve more than catchy political advertising in order to be effective. After 2008, having achieved the highest party vote of any political party in the five elections since New Zealand adopted a proportional representation electoral system, the National Party is now in a strong position to remain in power over several terms. This may provide a useful example for future comparative research on party renewal, such as the UK Conservative Party's recent attempts at 'modernization'. While voters were clearly tiring of the New Zealand Labour Party over the course of its third term in office from 2005 to 2008, which allowed the National Party's 'time for a change' argument to gradually become entrenched in the public imagination and to dominate much of the media coverage of political news during the 2008 election year, the party's rebranding strategies in opposition made an important contribution to the rehabilitation of the party's public identity, and thereby helping to increase the National Party's political credibility.

This paper has identified the three main dynamics of 'identity bricolage' that the New Zealand National Party gradually underwent following its loss of office in 1999 in order to restore the public appeal of its party brand. These can be briefly summarized as: (1) generational changes in personnel; (2) selected policy differentiation; and (3) the conversion of key positional issues into valence issues. This suggests the need for further research into the factors that determine, first, when a 'tipping point' with voters is reached whereby a party's rebranding efforts increasingly gain traction and contribute to improving a party's electability; and, second, why some rebranding strategies succeed whereas others fail.

As this New Zealand case study has illustrated, generational changes in the makeup of a party's parliamentary caucus are clearly important, especially if a younger and fresher opposition team can be contrasted with the overly-familiar faces of an incumbent government. Moreover, how a party re-articulates its policy positions through identity bricolage is crucial in order to convince voters that the party offers a credible alternative 'government in waiting' through reducing public fears about the unknown risks of a new policy agenda. Selected policy differentiation and the conversion of positional issues into valence issues both form important components of this process. First, the New Zealand experience suggests that voters may find policy differentiation more credible when this is highly selective, rather than strident opposition to an incumbent government's agenda for opposition's sake, and especially when it is pursued on issues where an opposition can win the argument over the government. One possible explanation for this is that trenchant and comprehensive opposition can inadvertently signal the likelihood of radical policy change under a new government to voters, which may prompt the risk-averse to stick with the status quo (at least in circumstances where the government's agenda has not been wholly discredited). Second, if governments are able to remain in power over consecutive election cycles it is likely that large parts of their agenda are strongly supported by voters. Opposition parties seeking to redefine their brand identity therefore face strong incentives to adapt their own policies to reflect changing voter preferences in key areas, a process which may also have the twin benefits of both publicly drawing a line between a party's present party brand and its past political baggage, and neutralizing a government's previous electoral advantages.

The specific policy areas that may be ripe for *valence conversion* – and that are likely to resonate positively with voters – will of course differ across countries. In the UK, for example, a key challenge for David Cameron's attempts to rebrand the Conservative Party may centre on whether the party can adopt a new 'Eurorealism' that transforms the controversial question of the UK's relationship with the European Union into a competence issue (Bale, 2006: 395). The equivalent issue area in contemporary party politics in New Zealand has been the National Party's adoption, especially under the leadership of John Key, of a new 'social pragmatism' that has involved the party signing up to supporting key elements of the social policy framework implemented under Labour-led governments from 1999 to 2008. By signaling an explicit commitment to retain – at least for the party's first term in government – the most electorally attractive elements of Labour's social policy agenda, the National Party was effectively able to both diminish its opponent's main source of voter appeal, and to rid itself of much of the party's past political baggage from its previous period in office. This ensured that one of the primary

focal points of positional competition in the 2008 election was National's 'home ground' of fiscal policy, which fortuitously for National occurred at the same time as Labour's economic management credentials were dented by deteriorating economic conditions and the onset of the country's first recession since the 1990s.

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