

History Matters: How historical events in New Zealand have shaped public opinion



RESEARCH

‘Major historical events have helped define New Zealand identity, shape public opinion, and guide political debate about biculturalism’

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Background

Historical events like the Treaty of Waitangi or the battle for Gallipoli can be invoked by political leaders to shape social attitudes and the national identity.

Political discussions around nation building include talking about historical events, which can be used as a strategy to strengthen claims. This type of rhetoric resonates with peoples’ emotions rather than using carefully worked out arguments.

Politicians can use history as an important resource to gather support for their public policies or to mobilise opposition to policies they oppose.

Both Māori and New Zealand Europeans perceive the Treaty of Waitangi as the most important event in New Zealand’s history. The Treaty has regularly included in discussions about ethnic diversity, equality/discrimination and immigration.

The Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research, part of Victoria University of Wellington, conducted experiments in both New Zealand and Taiwan to see how historical events play a role in shaping public opinion.

Main research findings

New Zealanders’ attitudes toward many social and political issues are connected to their beliefs about important historical events like the Treaty of Waitangi.

Certain historical events shape political attitudes more than others. For example, New Zealanders perceive the Treaty of Waitangi as more important than the Hone Heke down cutting of the British flagpole. Referring to the Treaty can be used effectively in shaping public opinion, but the Hone Heke incident might not influence most people.

New Zealanders’ attitudes towards biculturalism are difficult to change, but can be influenced by referencing certain historical events. Both biculturalism and opposition to it are linked to different ideas about national identity.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

Politicians can invoke historical events to influence public opinion.

Framing political discussions with historical events can increase or decrease support on major issues regarding public policy in New Zealand.

Issues like ethnic diversity, biculturalism, and multiculturalism regularly refer to major historical events like the Treaty of Waitangi.

Reminding New Zealanders of particular events in history can help politicians legitimise political positions. These events can be used as tools to sway the public, sometimes even in irresponsible ways that damage social harmony.