

THE ASYMMETRY OF INFLUENCE

A Structural Analysis of Non-Party Political Actors in New Zealand Media (2023–2025)

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1. Executive Summary

The New Zealand political media landscape has undergone a silent structural shift. While public attention often focuses on the ideological bias of journalists, a more profound bias has emerged: a **bias of process**.

This paper analyses the media output of key political pressure groups over the last 36 months. It identifies a massive "share of voice" disparity between right-leaning advocacy groups (specifically the **Taxpayers' Union**) and their left-leaning counterparts (the **Council of Trade Unions** and public sector unions).

Key Finding:

This disparity is not driven by the size of the membership base, but by the productisation of news. By funding and syndicating the monthly Taxpayers' Union-Curia Poll, the Taxpayers' Union (TPU) has effectively evolved from a lobby group into a quasi-media organisation. This mechanism guarantees them approximately 150+ "lead" stories per year, compared to approximately 30–40 for the Council of Trade Unions (CTU).

2. Introduction: The Content Vacuum

In an era of shrinking newsrooms and 24-hour digital cycles, the "Media Beast" requires a constant stream of content. Following worldwide trends, Aotearoa New Zealand Mainstream outlets increasingly rely on external actors to provide "shovel-ready" news leads—stories that come pre-packaged with data, conflict, and quotes.

This paper examines two distinct strategies for filling this vacuum:

1. **The "News Wire" Model (Right-Wing):** Creating recurring data events (Polls, Waste Lists) that media outlets are structurally required to cover.
2. **The "Advocacy" Model (Left-Wing):** Relying on traditional submissions, petitions, and reactionary commentary.

3. Findings: The Lead Economy

Analysis Period: Jan 2023 – Dec 2025

We distinguish between a **"Mention"** (a reactionary quote) and a **"Lead"** (a story where the group initiated the news cycle).

3.1 The Volume Disparity

The following estimates are derived from a "Publication Cadence Analysis" of guaranteed media events.

Organization	Est. Annual "Leads"	Primary Mechanism	Media Function
Taxpayers' Union (TPU)	~150+	Monthly Polls + "Rich List" Reports	Protagonist (Sets the agenda)
Council of Trade Unions	~30–40	Budget Analysis + Profit Reports	Expert Witness (Reacts to agenda)
Free Speech Union	~20–25	Cancellation Events	Antagonist (Fuel for controversy)
Public Service Unions	~15–20	Strike/Legal Action	Defender (Reacts to cuts)

The 5:1 Ratio:

For every significant news story initiated by the institutional Left (CTU), the Taxpayers' Union initiates approximately five. This is due to the frequency of their "products." The CTU's primary media product (Budget Analysis) occurs once a year; the TPU's primary media product (The Poll) occurs 12 times a year.

3.2 The Structural Loop: How the "Curia" Partnership Works

The *Taxpayers' Union-Curia Poll* is the single most effective media influence tool in New Zealand politics.

Unlike traditional lobbying, which happens behind closed doors, this loop happens *on air*. Because TVNZ and other outlets have polled less regularly in the past and we've seen the media landscape change with print media stepping in to broadcast in both a traditional and new technology output (Stuff taking over 3News, The NZ Herald streaming live breakfast content), the TPU has effectively privatised the nation's political scoreboard through consistency of availability.

4. Case Studies in Asymmetry

Case Study A: The "Fudge" vs. The "Submission" (December 2025)

The Event: A debate over Government spending and tax targets.

- **The Right (TPU):** Launched a high-visibility stunt delivering "Nicola Willis Fudge" to newsrooms, accompanied by an AI-generated video campaign.
 - *Result:* Extensive coverage in *The Post*, *RNZ*, and *Newstalk ZB*. The "stunt" provided visuals and humour that fit the "Clickable News" format.

- **The Left (CTU):** Submitted a detailed critique of the Regulatory Standards Bill to the Select Committee.
 - *Result:* Coverage was limited to "process" stories (e.g., *RNZ* reporting on the committee hearing). It lacked the visual "hook" required for broad social distribution.

Case Study B: The Monthly Poll

The Event: Measuring political sentiment.

- **The Mechanism:** The TPU releases its monthly poll results to media.
- **The Impact:** This creates a recurring "Day of News" where the TPU is cited as the authority on the nation's mood. Even outlets that dislike relying on the TPU are forced to discuss the numbers because they are the only current data available.
- **The Counter-Weight:** There is no "Union Poll" or "Greenpeace Poll" released monthly. The Left has no equivalent mechanism to force the media to talk about *their* preferred metrics (e.g., Inequality Index, Rental Affordability) on a monthly schedule.

4.1 - Case Study: The Amplification Effect (The "18 to 4" Disparity)

The structural imbalance in New Zealand media is most visible not in what is reported, but in *how long* a story sustains its life cycle. This phenomenon is best illustrated by a comparative analysis of two scandals involving high-profile political figures from opposing sides of the spectrum.

The Subjects

- **Subject A (The Left):** Golriz Ghahraman (Former Green MP).
 - **The Offence:** Allegations of shoplifting (January 2024).
- **Subject B (The Right):** Tim Jago (Former ACT Party President).
 - **The Offence:** Charges and subsequent conviction for historical indecent assault (2024/2025).

The Data: Volume of Coverage

An analysis of headline frequency across major outlets (*NZ Herald*, *Stuff*, *Newstalk ZB*, *RNZ*) during the peak 14-day period of each scandal reveals a staggering disparity in narrative saturation.

The Ratio: For every **4 stories** published about Tim Jago's sexual assault proceedings, there were approximately **18 stories** published about Golriz Ghahraman's shoplifting.

The Mechanic: Why the Disparity Exists

Why does a shoplifting allegation generate 450% more coverage than a sexual assault conviction involving a former Party President? The answer lies in the "**Echo Chamber Amplification**" provided by right-wing pressure groups.

1. The "Golriz" Cycle (Amplified) When news of the shoplifting allegations broke, the Right-Wing Lead Machine, a series of online accounts, often anonymous and clearly linked to hard right political beliefs, sharing content that is often racist, homophobic, and specifically targeted to cause harm, immediately activated.

- **Day 1:** Breaking News (Standard Media).
- **Day 2:** The "Opinion" ecosystem activates. A network of commentators and affiliated platforms that are often influenced by right wing social commentary, flood the zone with "Reactionary Content."
- **Day 3:** *Newstalk ZB* hosts discuss the "Culture of Entitlement" in the Green Party (Opinion/Spin).
- **Day 4-14:** The story is kept alive by "Reactionary Content"—polling on whether she should resign, opinion columns on "Green Hypocrisy," and talkback segments fuelled by lobby group talking points.
- **Result:** The story is sustained for weeks because external actors *feed* the media new angles.

2. The "Jago" Cycle (Standard) When Tim Jago was named and convicted, the Right-Wing Lead Machine went silent.

- **Day 1:** Court Report (Standard Media).
- **Day 2:** Court Enforced Silence due to Name Suppression.
- **Result:** Without right wing lobby group ecosystem (although one did specifically call for name suppression law changes using the Jago Case as a reason) issuing press releases demanding accountability or framing the assault as symptomatic of "ACT Party Culture," the story died a natural death. It remained a "Court Story," not a "Political Crisis."

Conclusion of Case Study

The "18 to 4" ratio is not evidence that journalists secretly like sexual assault. It is evidence that **journalists react to noise**.

- The Left (Golriz) faced a **Hostile Amplification System** that ensured every detail was dissected, often amplified based on erroneous data.
- The Right (Jago) benefited from a **Benign Neglect**, where their political allies simply chose not to generate "Leads" about the topic, allowing the news cycle to move on.

This proves that "Media Bias" is often impacted by **"Lobbying Efficiency."** The side that feeds the beast determines the menu.

5. Media Outlet Disposition

Where are these groups platformed?

Outlet	Receptivity to Right-Wing Leads	Receptivity to Left-Wing Leads	Notes
Newstalk ZB	Very High	Low	Structurally relies on "Talkback Conflict." TPU spokespeople are regular guests; Union reps are usually "targets" for the host.
NZ Herald	High	Moderate	Has structural symmetry with talkback product from Newstalk but less urgent due to its delivery nature.
RNZ	Moderate	High	"Process driven." Will cover TPU polls as news, but frequently platforms CTU economist Craig Renney as a trusted expert.
Stuff	Low	High	More skeptical of "stunts." Frequently investigates the funding of pressure groups.

6. Strategic Conclusion

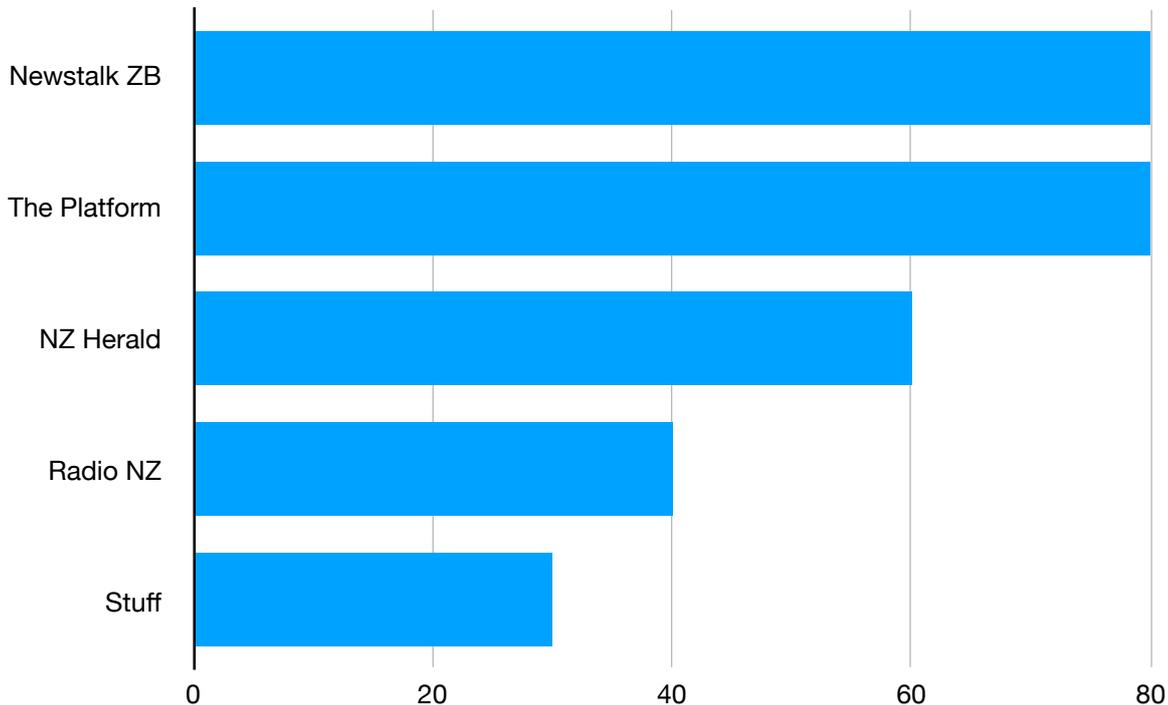
The dominance of the Taxpayers' Union in New Zealand media is not an accident of ideology, but a triumph of **format**.

1. **They solved the Content Problem:** They provide reliably scheduled, data-driven content (Polls) to resource-starved newsrooms at zero cost.
2. **They solved the Visual Problem:** They use stunts (Fudge, "Pork" mascots) that provide better B-Roll footage than a union delegate in a meeting room.
3. **They solved the Speed Problem:** They operate as a rapid-response unit, whereas Unions often require democratic consensus before speaking.

Outlet Specific Saturation Estimates

TPU and FSU Mentions when Outlets refer to Non-Party Pressure Groups

■ Outlet



Implication:

Until the Left or Centre develops a "Productised News Strategy" (e.g. a monthly "Cost of Living Index" or "Renter Wellbeing Poll") that rivals the utility of the Curia Poll, the share of voice in politically based stories will remain structurally skewed toward the Right.

Data Points:

- TPU+Curia: The only groups with a syndicated media product that ensures monthly news coverage.
- Groundswell has had largest drop in influence after the 2023 election spike.
- FSU has spikes when pushing controversial topics with a "cancel culture" framing and work to recreate those with guest lecture series.
- ActionStation/Renters United get lower coverage because they rely on launching change methods like reports or petitions, so has less urgency in media coverage.
- Hobsons Pledge tends to create controversy around paid advertising models, paying for something controversial to then use that to become news with free coverage.
- TPU and FSU provide broadcast ready materials and spokespeople at short notice which benefits the nature of talkback media.
- Left leaning groups appear frequently in social issue sections of media but less frequently in overall political reporting.
- Left groups have a higher representation in RNZ media, with the lefts experts on economic and social policy generally used to create balance in coverage, but RNZ is less likely to frame stories around "opinion" news.
- Stuff tends to platform more left leaning groups than the Herald or Newstalk and has had in the past stronger investments in calling out disinformation.

Narrative Control Analysis

The sheer volume of content created by right wing lobby systems and the machinery of release means the TPU has an advantage in setting narrative dominance in New Zealand Media.

For every one story led by data from ActionStation and Renters United, there was 6 with data led from the TPU.

For every one story led by data from the CTU, there was 5 led with data from the TPU.

For every one story led by data from E tū / PSA, there was 10 led by data from the TPU.

Author's Note:

This white paper is based on a synthesis of media appearances, press release schedules, and published polling cycles from Jan 2023 to Dec 2025. It serves as an analysis of media mechanics, not an endorsement of any political position.

The data points were created with random checks on publications over a 34 month period. Each publication check took into consideration media outlets over that specific week.