

Australian elections: voting trends reveal deepening disaffection

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Two weeks after the October 9 federal elections in Australia, the results are nearly finalised, following the counting of postal votes and the complex allocation of preferences. They confirm a defeat of historic magnitude for the opposition Labor Party.

Prime Minister John Howard's Liberal-National Coalition has obtained a substantially increased majority in the House of Representatives, where it will hold at least 87 of the 150 seats, up from 82. Labor will drop from 64 seats to 60. After taking eight seats from, and losing four seats to, Labor, the government's majority has grown from 8 to 14.

Moreover, the Coalition could hold a majority in the Senate for the first time since the Fraser government during the 1970s, enabling it to pass legislation, including a string of previously blocked bills, without parliamentary amendment or delay. The final outcome in the Senate will not be known until later this week.

The government's gains have been inflated by the undemocratic preferential voting system, which ultimately forces most voters to cast a ballot in favour of either the Coalition or Labor. Nevertheless, its share of first preference votes jumped by 3.6 percentage points, from 43 percent to 46.5 percent, just short of the 46.9 percent that it won in 1996, when the Keating Labor government was ousted in an electoral landslide.

The results have several particularly revealing features. One is that Howard largely secured his victory in the "mortgage belt" outer suburban areas of the main cities across the country, where his scare campaign on the risk of rising interest rates under a Labor government played on the anxieties of families struggling to pay off home loan and credit card debts, both running at historically unprecedented levels.

An analysis produced by the *Australian* newspaper shows that all eight seats taken by the government from Labor were in the "mortgage belts" where the proportion of households with a mortgage exceeded the national average of 26.5 percent. By contrast, none of the five seats that Labor gained were in the most heavily indebted regions. The newspaper even underestimated the size of the shift to the government in the mortgage belt seats by presenting the "two-party preferred" swing—after the allocation of preferences—rather than the first preference figures.

The biggest first preference gain by the Liberals—11 percentage points—occurred in the outer Perth seat of Canning, the electorate with the highest proportion of households with a mortgage, 43.5 percent. The next largest shift—7 percentage points—came in the traditionally Labor-held outer Sydney seat of Greenway, where 32.7 percent of households have a mortgage. The pattern was replicated in outer suburbs across the country: 6.6 percentage points in the Brisbane electorate of Dickson, 6.1 in the Perth seat of Hasluck, 4.5 in the Melbourne electorate of La Trobe and 3.5 in the Adelaide seat of Kingston.

Not only did eight of these seats fall to the Liberals, some were for the first time, as in Greenway. In other former "safe" Labor seats, such as Lindsay (Penrith) and Macarthur (Campbelltown-Camden) on the far-western and south-western fringes of Sydney, as well as Canning, Dickson, and La Trobe, sitting Liberal MPs have substantially increased

their margins.

While claiming to have delivered prosperity, primarily on the basis of the doubling of house prices since 1996, Howard made an essentially negative appeal to financially strained homebuyers in these new housing areas, many of whom face catastrophe if interest rates rise even a fraction, or if either partner loses their job or even suffers a reduction in hours.

The Liberals also appear to have picked up most of the 3.2 percentage point loss by the right-wing populist Pauline Hanson's One Nation, whose vote collapsed from 4.3 percent to 1.1 percent. Over the past six years, Howard has implemented substantial portions of Hanson's reactionary program, which played on economic insecurities by demanding the expulsion of refugees and sweeping cuts to Aboriginal programs.

Outside the cities, support for Howard's coalition partner, the rural-based National Party, remained near the historically low levels of the 1998 and 2001 elections, in which it lost swathes of votes to One Nation and rural Independents. The Nationals lost one of their ministers, Larry Anthony, reducing their tally of lower house MPs from 13 to 12. Three Independents—Tony Windsor, Peter Andren and Bob Katter—easily retained traditional National Party seats despite intensive government bids to oust them, indicating continuing discontent over the plight of family farmers, the erosion of public services and the government's plans to fully privatise Telstra, the main telecommunications carrier.

Part of One Nation's base may have drifted to the previously unknown Christian fundamentalist Family First Party, whose leaders stridently oppose abortion, embryonic stem cell research and homosexuality. With Howard's personal encouragement and assisted by preference-swapping deals with both the Coalition and Labor, Family First may obtain seats in the Senate after winning about 2 percent of the vote. The party seeks to divert social discontent in a right-wing direction, while cloaking its agenda in the language of "putting families first".

A second feature of the election results was Labor's inability to benefit from the deep disgust felt among broad layers of the population toward the Howard government over the Iraq war, the treatment of asylum seekers, far-reaching attacks on democratic rights and deteriorating working conditions and social programs.

Labor's vote fell from 37.7 percent to 37.6 percent, its second worst result since 1931, when the Scullin government was defeated after inflicting massive job and spending cuts during the Great Depression. It remains below the 38.7 percent recorded in the crushing defeat of 1996, and, for the first time, Labor trailed the Coalition by more than one million votes—4.3 million to the Coalition's 5.3 million.

This deepens an underlying trend. The party that obtained more than half the "two-party preferred" vote after the allocation of preferences when the Whitlam government was elected in 1972 (52.7 percent) and the Hawke government in 1983 (53.2 percent), has not recovered since 1990. At that election, its first preference vote plunged below 40 percent, its "two-party preferred" vote dropped below 50 percent, and the Hawke government barely clung to office with the assistance of second

preference votes from the Australian Democrats.

This year, those looking for ways to express their opposition to the government saw Labor as no alternative. Throughout the election campaign, Labor leader Mark Latham assisted Howard and the mainstream media to bury the issues of the Iraq invasion, the collapse of the lies told to justify it, and the brutal detention of asylum seekers, which Labor initiated in the early 1990s.

Strong votes were recorded against the three ministers centrally responsible—Howard, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and Attorney-General Philip Ruddock—but not as the result of any efforts by Labor. Against Howard, the Greens' candidate, former intelligence officer Andrew Wilkie, a well-known critic of the Iraq invasion, won 16.5 percent of the vote, while Howard dropped 3.7 percentage points. Running as an Independent against Downer, former magistrate Brian Deegan, whose son died in the Bali bombing and who passionately condemned the "war on terror", polled 15.3 percent. Ruddock, whose orchestration of the anti-refugee campaign in the 2001 elections made him a government hero, suffered the biggest loss of any government MP—4 percentage points—with most of those votes going to the Greens.

Alongside Labor's refusal to indict the Howard government, more fundamental factors were at work. Labor's vote fell most sharply in working class electorates—those hardest hit by the union-busting, job destruction, privatisation and other "economic restructuring" carried out under Hawke and Keating from 1983 to 1996.

Across the western and northern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia's most industrialised state capital, Labor suffered swings against it of nearly five percentage points. The heaviest loss of 4.7 percentage points was recorded in Scullin, followed by 4.6 in Maribyrnong, 3.9 in Gillibrand, 2.5 in Batman and 1.3 in Lalor (the latter three seats are held by shadow ministers, Nicola Roxon, Martin Ferguson and Julia Gillard respectively).

These swings in Victoria probably also reflected experiences with the Bracks state Labor government, which has continued the Hawke-Keating program of privatisation, job shedding and the running down of public services—following, as well, in the footsteps of its state government predecessor, the Kennett Liberal government. In NSW too, the results appear to be connected to growing hostility on the part of ordinary working people toward the Carr state Labor government's record of deteriorating hospitals, schools, railways, water supply and other infrastructure. The swings against Labor reached as high as 5.7 percentage points in the Sydney western electorates of Reid and Prospect.

With Labor carrying out similar policies in office in every state and territory, substantial anti-Labor shifts were seen in "blue ribbon" seats nationally. Particularly large swings occurred in Western Australia, including 4.6 percentage points in Brand (held by ex-Labor leader Kim Beazley), 3.9 in Cowan and 2.4 in Fremantle (former Labor national president Carmen Lawrence's seat).

By contrast, Labor increased its vote among upper middle class layers, notably in the inner-city seats of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide and in some very affluent neighbourhoods. In several traditional Liberal strongholds—Sydney's North Shore and all across Melbourne's eastern suburbs—Labor secured gains of 2 to 3.5 points. In the two Australian Capital Territory seats of Canberra and Fraser, which have some of the highest average income levels in the country, Labor gained more than 3 percentage points. Many residents in these areas—professionals, corporate executives, senior public servants—have prospered under the free-market program introduced by Hawke and Keating, which Latham pledged to take further.

A third feature of the election was the deepening alienation of broad layers of the population, particularly young people, from the political system as a whole. This hostility has been expressed increasingly in every Australian election over the past two decades.

This year, some 5.1 percent of enrolled voters, or nearly 600,000 people,

cast "informal" votes—they either spoiled their ballot papers, refused to give preferences to every candidate or otherwise failed to satisfy the electoral rules. Over the past four federal elections, the proportion of informal votes has almost doubled from 3 percent in 1993.

The highest informal voting rates—up to 11.2 percent—were recorded in Labor and former Labor-held working class electorates across Sydney's western suburbs. A dozen seats registered informal votes of around 10 percent. The sharpest rise, from 6.8 to 10.9 percent, occurred in Greenway—another expression of the disenchantment that lay behind the seat being won by a Liberal candidate for the first time.

Electoral enrolment and voting are compulsory for all Australian citizens over the age of 18. Those who refuse can be fined and, if they do not pay the fine, jailed. Even so, another 650,000 people did not vote at all. In addition, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) estimates that a further 675,000 people are not enrolled.

If these figures are added to the "informal" vote, nearly two million adults, or close to a fifth of the eligible population, failed or refused to vote. By all the available evidence, they are mostly working people, the jobless and the young. According to Centrelink data cited in a 2002 Australian National Audit Office report on electoral enrolment, 2.5 million adults receiving social security payments are not enrolled. (This will include immigrants and refugees who are not entitled to citizenship, and thus denied the right to vote.)

The AEC and the Audit Office calculate that about one-third of those not enrolled are young people who have never enrolled, while another third have been struck off the roll because they no longer live at their registered address. The proportion of young people failing to enrol has continued to rise in recent years despite various "Rock Enrol" concerts and promotions organised by the AEC, in conjunction with rock music radio stations.

The AEC has become so perplexed by this trend that earlier this year it announced a four-year "Youth Electoral Study" to "explore why many are not enrolling to vote and how best to encourage them to become more active democratic citizens". Electoral Commissioner Andy Becker said the study was addressing an important issue not only in Australia but increasingly worldwide. "We have known for many years that the younger you are, the less likely you are to be correctly enrolled, but we haven't known much about why," he said.

There is no real mystery here. Growing numbers of young people have no confidence in the political or economic system. There are signs of a growing politicisation among the youth, but not in the direction of the old parties. Many joined the global marches last year against the looming Iraq war, only to have their voices ignored. Regardless of whether Liberal or Labor is in office, they face a future dominated by militarism and war, coupled with deteriorating school conditions, soaring costs for higher education, and increasingly insecure, casualised and low-paid work.

A final feature was the failure of the perspective advanced by the Australian Greens—that of returning a Labor government on the back of Greens preferences. To some extent, voters who opposed the Iraq war and Labor's free-market program swung to the Greens.

In some seats, the Australian Greens won substantial support, roughly maintaining the vote they have won in recent federal, state and local elections by declaring opposition to the war. They polled 21.5 percent in the seat of Sydney, about 20 percent in two other electorates, neighbouring Grayndler and the Wollongong-based seat of Cunningham, and more than 10 percent in other inner-city seats.

Nevertheless, the Greens lost Cunningham, their only House of Representatives seat, which returned to Labor, and they may not secure any extra seats in the Senate, where they have two members. They fell far short of their leader Senator Bob Brown's predictions that the Greens would obtain one million votes and help return a Latham government.

After enjoying considerable mass media promotion as the new "third

force” of Australian politics, the Greens’ vote rose by only 1.9 points to 6.9 percent, a tally of 750,000. This was despite the disintegration of the Australian Democrats, their main Senate rivals, whose vote shrank from 5.4 percent to 1.2 percent. Support for the Democrats, a “middle party” appealing to national-based small business and professional layers, has plunged ever since it assisted Howard to introduce the highly regressive Goods and Services Tax in 1999.

The Greens were at the forefront of an “anybody but Howard” campaign, which attempted to push the myth that a Labor government could be forced by popular demand to wind back the social reversals commenced under Hawke and Keating two decades ago. Like Labor, the Greens virtually dropped all mention of the Iraq war in the lead-up to the election, not wanting to fundamentally challenge the official political consensus. Brown made it clear that his goal was to join Latham in a de facto coalition government, with the Greens “holding the line” against protests over unpopular funding cuts, as they did in the state of Tasmania during the late 1980s.

Taken as a whole, far from signalling a new era of stability under Howard, the results of the 2004 elections point to a fragile and volatile political situation, dominated by an ever-deepening social polarisation, financial anxieties and social tensions. Above all, they demonstrate that the increasingly sclerotic and discredited political system is incapable of meeting the needs and aspirations of the vast majority of people.



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