



RESEARCH NOTE

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Voting Patterns and the Gender Gap: Rural and Regional Dimensions

Introduction

Recently, there has been considerable media speculation as to what voters in rural and regional electorates will do. In this context, it is of interest to review how women in rural and regional Australia have voted in the past and, in particular, how the National Party fares amongst women.¹

Recent Trends

The tables overleaf use data from the Australian Election Surveys (1987–1998).² These are mail-out surveys conducted after each election, with approximately 2000 responses per survey. The data cannot be assumed to be exact, only potentially indicative.

In the House of Representatives and the Senate, women voters appear to have favoured the Coalition over the Australian Labor Party (ALP) since 1990. This divergence in party preference is significant in 1996 with 52 per cent of women supporting the Coalition compared with 34 per cent support for the ALP in the House of Representatives (although a similar anti-ALP trend is evident amongst men). In the Senate, both women and men appear less likely to vote either Liberal or ALP.³ The National Party vote remains steady for both women and men across the House of Representatives and the Senate, with no gender gap evident.

It appears that more women than men are attracted to the Australian Democrats (although there needs to

be some caution with analysis of minor parties given the small sample size). Since 1993 the gender gap in vote for the Democrats in the Senate has begun to diminish and disappears in 1998. The One Nation Party received more support from men than women in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Rural and Regional Women and Vote

The gap between women and men voting for the Coalition in rural and regional Australia reflects the gap evident overall between 1993 and 1998: that is more women than men seem to support the Coalition in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Women are more likely to vote Liberal than men but there has been a gradual decrease in the support rural and regional women show for the National Party since 1993. Where more women than men voted National in 1993, the reverse was the case in 1998.

Similarly with the ALP, the gender gap is almost the same in rural and regional Australia, the exception being in 1996, when the gap overall is -5 per cent, but is only -2 per cent amongst rural and regional ALP voters. Not surprisingly, One Nation's support is higher in rural and regional Australia compared to the overall vote.

Women who vote Liberal in the House of Representatives in rural and regional Australia do not appear to vote differently in the Senate. In contrast, men who vote Liberal and

women who vote National and ALP, appear to vote differently in the Senate.

Since 1990, it seems women prefer the Coalition to the ALP. But it is worthwhile looking at women's support for the Liberal and National parties separately. Comparing women's vote for the Liberals to women's vote for the ALP in the House of Representatives, the results are varied (see Table 5). In 1998, women gave the Liberals and the ALP similar levels of support, while in 1993, women preferred the ALP to the Liberals, generally and in rural and regional Australia. This highlights the importance of the National Party's women's vote to Coalition success.

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Male/Female Vote in Federal Elections 1987–1998

Source: Australian Election Surveys, Social Science Data Archives, ANU

Table 1: Primary Vote for Coalition*

	House of Representatives			Senate		
	% Women	% Men	Difference	% Women	% Men	Difference
1987	(34+9) 43	(33+9) 42	1	(31+10) 41	(32+11) 43	-2
1990	(37+6) 43	(38+5) 43	0	(35+6) 41	(37+5) 42	-1
1993	(44+4) 48	(39+ 4) 41	7	(43+5) 48	(39+4) 41	7
1996	(47+5) 52	(45+6) 51	1	(45+5) 50	(40+6) 46	4
1998	(39+5) 44	(36+5) 41	3	(36+3) 39	(31+5) 36	3

*Liberal and National vote noted respectively in brackets

Table 2: Primary Vote for the Australian Labor Party

	House of Representatives			Senate		
	% Women	% Men	Difference	% Women	% Men	Difference
1987	49	53	-4	46	46	0
1990	40	42	-2	37	40	-3
1993	46	52	-6	41	44	-3
1996	34	39	-5	31	34	-3
1998	39	42	-3	35	37	-2

Table 3: Primary Vote for Australian Democrats

	House of Representatives			Senate		
	% Women	% Men	Difference	% Women	% Men	Difference
1987	7	4	3	10	7	3
1990	14	11	3	17	13	4
1993	3	3	0	6	8	-2
1996	8	5	3	13	14	-1
1998	6	5	1	15	15	0

Table 4: Primary Vote for One Nation

	House of Representatives			Senate		
	% Women	% Men	Difference	% Women	% Men	Difference
1998	4	9	-5	6	9	-3

Regional Dimension to Male/Female Vote in Federal Elections 1993–1998

Table 5: Rural/Regional Vote in House of Representatives 1993–1998

	1993		1996		1998	
	% Women	% Men	% Women	% Men	% Women	% Men
Liberal	40	36	44	43	36	31
National	11	8	10	10	9	11
Labor	44	50	34	36	36	39
Democrats	2	3	6	5	6	4
One Nation	-	-	-	-	6	11

Table 6: Rural/Regional Vote in Senate 1993–1998

	1993		1996		1998	
	% Women	% Men	% Women	% Men	% Women	% Men
Liberal	39	36	44	40	36	27
National	10	8	8	8	6	8
Labor	40	44	31	33	32	36
Democrats	5	6	12	12	12	13
One Nation	-	-	-	-	9	11

1. See also Jennifer Curtin, 'The Gender Gap in Australian Elections', Department of the Parliamentary Library, *Research Paper no. 3*, 1997–98.
2. Conducted by I. McAllister, D. Gow and colleagues and stored at the Social Science Data Archives, ANU.
3. This is a trend amongst all voters, see Scott Bennett, 'The Decline in Support for Australian Major Parties and the Prospect of Minority Government', Department of the Parliamentary Library, *Research Paper no. 10*, 1998–99.