



RESEARCH NOTE

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Estimating the Direction of Minor Party Preferences

Introduction

This Note outlines a number of measures for estimating the direction of minor party and independent preferences using 1987, 1990 and 1993 House of Representatives election results.

The question of which of the major parties benefits most from the second preferences of minor parties and independents has been the subject of discussion since the introduction of preferential voting in 1918. The increasing number of seats being decided on preferences (43% at the 1993 election compared with 25% for the 1950s and 1960s and 30% in the 1970s¹) together with the rise of single issue parties and attempts by the major parties to actively target the second preferences of minor parties, have added interest to the question.

In the modern era of Australian politics (post 1949) there has been a considerable shift in the direction of minor party preferences. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Coalition parties were the clear beneficiary of minor party preferences; largely thanks to the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). The demise of the DLP

and the advent of new centre orientated minor parties in the 1970s resulted in the advantage enjoyed by the Coalition being substantially reduced. This trend has continued to such an extent that in recent elections the Australian Labor Party has been the main beneficiary of aggregate minor party and independent preferences.

Estimating the Direction

Outlined below are two methods that can be used to provide a total measure of the direction of minor party and independent preferences. The first method calculates the difference between the major parties' first preference votes and two party preferred votes, while the second calculates the number of seats won by a party where the party received fewer first preference votes than the other party.

Table 1 shows the difference between first preference votes and the two party preferred vote for both major parties at the 1987, 1990 and 1993 elections.

In the three elections the ALP recorded a larger increase than the Coalition, with the 1990 election showing the largest increase at

10.5%.

The aggregate preference split favoured the Labor Party over the Coalition by approximately 60%/40% in all three elections.

The second method for measuring the direction of minor party and independent preferences involves calculating the number of seats won by one of the major parties after having received fewer first preference votes in the seat than the other major party (see Table 2: Coming From Behind). This measure is complicated somewhat by the number of three cornered contests, but can still be used if the Liberal and National Party first preference votes are added together in such cases.

At the 1987 election there were five cases where the party winning the seat trailed the other major party on first preference votes: in all five cases the ALP was the winner after having trailed the Coalition. However, a leakage of preferences to the ALP from the Coalition parties helped the ALP win in some of these seats. At the 1990 election ten cases occurred: in all ten seats the ALP was the winner after having trailed the Coalition. In 1993, ten cases also occurred: in nine seats the ALP won after having trailed the Coalition and in one seat the Liberal Party won after having trailed the ALP.

The Labor Party's ability to win seats after trailing on first preferences votes in recent elections contrasts markedly with the period between 1949 and 1975 where the ALP came from behind to win in only four out of the eighty-four seats determined in this fashion².

Both measures outlined above suggest that the ALP has benefited more, in total, from the

Table 1

Election	First Preference (a) %	Two Party Preferred %	Difference %	Aggregate Preference Split (b) %
1987				
ALP	45.8	50.8	5.0	61.7
LP/NP	46.1	49.2	3.1	38.3
1990				
ALP	39.4	49.9	10.5	61.0
LP/NP	43.4	50.1	6.7	39.0
1993				
ALP	44.9	51.4	6.5	60.2
LP/NP	44.3	48.6	4.3	39.8

(a) Aggregate of Liberal and National Parties first preference votes.

(b) Percentage share of total increase in votes between first preference and two party preferred votes.

preferences of minor parties and independents than the Coalition at the last three elections.

Individual Party Preferences

While it is clear from the above that the ALP has been the main beneficiary of minor party and independent preferences overall in the last three elections, what is not clear is the size of the support from individual minor parties.

from opinion polls or post election surveys and data from the full count of preferences conducted by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC).

Opinion polls and post-election surveys suffer from the normal problems associated with survey data while post-election surveys have the added burden of faulty or selective memory. They also don't

Table 4 shows data from Morgan Polls conducted before the 1993 election and the most recently published second preference poll.

Information from the full count of preferences conducted by the AEC should in theory at least provide the best data on the destination of minor party and independent preferences. However, the data is obscured to such an extent that it is difficult to obtain meaningful results. This is because each candidate in a Division is excluded in turn and as he/her is excluded, the second preference votes are added to each remaining candidate. Thus, each remaining candidates' votes include first preference votes and second or later preference votes from excluded candidates. Once second or later preferences votes are transferred to a remaining candidate they become indistinguishable from first preference votes. While the full count of preferences provides valuable data on the two party preferred vote it fails to provide useful data on the destination of preferences.

Table 2: Coming from Behind

1987 Election	1990 Election	1993 Election	
ALP wins	ALP wins	ALP wins	LP/NP wins
Fisher(a)	Page	Gilmore(a)	Bendigo
Forde(a)	Richmond	Macquarie	
Hinkler(a)	Jagajaga	Page(a)	
Northern Territory	Melbourne Ports	Richmond(a)	
Petrie(a)	Fisher(a)	McEwen	
	Kennedy(a)	Dickson(a)	
	Moreton(a)	Leichhardt(a)	
	Canning	Swan	
	Cowan	Bass	
	Stirling		

(a) ALP won seat after being behind total of LP and NP first preference votes

**Table 3: Post-election Survey:
Second Preferences of Minor Parties
Percent**

Second Preferences	1987		1990		
	AD	Other	AD	Greens	Others
ALP	55	60	57	54	32
LP/NP	44	30	24	7	46
AD	..	10	..	38	16
Greens	1	..	16	..	5
Others	3	1	..

Source: Bean, C. and Papadakis, E. 1995, 'Independents and Minor parties: The Electoral System. In *Australian Journal of Political Science* 30 (Special Issue)

**Table 4: Opinion Polls:
Second Preference Distribution
Percent**

	February 1993			July-September 1995		
	AD	Greens	Others	AD	Greens	Others
ALP	58	73	42	55	68	45
LNP	42	27	58	45	32	55

Source: Roy Morgan Research Centre.

Unfortunately, statistical evidence (as apposed to anecdote or conjecture) of the direction of individual party preferences is rather limited. Two possible sources are available, neither of which provide totally satisfactory evidence. The sources are data

always provide details of the final destination of preferences. Table 3 provides details of post-election surveys (National Social Science Survey) conducted after the 1987 and 1990 elections; data on the direction of preferences are not available for the 1993 election.

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¹ Hughes, C.A. 1990 'The Rules of the Game'. In *The Greening of Australian Politics: The 1990 Federal Election*, ed. C. Bean, I. McAllister and J. Warhurst, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
² Hughes, C.A. 1977 *The Electorate Speaks—And After!* In *Australia at the Polls: The National Elections of 1975*, ed. H.R. Penniman. Washington: American Enterprise Institute.