

Chapter One: Rural and Regional Discontent: Setting the Scene

In order to put this research into context, two manifestations of political discontent are reviewed here. The first is the electoral behaviour of rural and regional Australians and how this has changed over time. The second is citizens' feelings of trust in the political process. The chapter examines what is considered to be the cause of such distrust, and explores what solutions might be possible in restoring citizens' political trust.

Country Australia and the Vote

Don Aitkin once argued that there were two good reasons for paying particular attention to the urban–rural dimension in Australian politics. First because of the continued existence of the National Party (modern agrarian parties being rare creatures), and second because tensions between city and country have always existed both in Australia and elsewhere.¹ Kemp also claimed in 1978 that the potency of the rural–urban division in Australian politics had been sorely neglected by political analysts. Both Aitkin and Kemp attempted to put this right by dedicating considerable attention to the electoral behaviour of those residing in country Australia.²

Aitkin described rural Australia in the late 1960s: no large cities, little heavy industry, primary producers, less formally educated, more likely to be Protestant, churchgoers and possessors of conservative social attitudes. Describing country people as inward-looking, slow to accept new ideas, less volatile in their voting patterns, and strongly anti-Labor, Aitkin pondered the importance of community homogeneity to party identification. He suggested that the political outlook of farmers for example owed its character principally to the fact that most farmers' friends and neighbours were other farmers. Further, he argued that despite population changes, the particular identity of such communities would remain intact over time.³

However, since the late 1960s, rural Australia has changed considerably. The process of urbanisation has continued, with the proportion of those living outside urban areas accounting for only 13 per cent of the total population.

