



RESEARCH NOTE

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Voting Patterns of Older Australians

Introduction

Older Australians have received considerable attention with the 2001 Budget's focus on self-funded retirees and other aged pensioners. These voters are often portrayed as traditional supporters of the Coalition. This Research Note reviews the voting patterns of those Australians aged 55 years and over.

Recent Trends

The tables overleaf are drawn from the Australian Election Surveys (1987–1998).¹ These are mail-out surveys conducted after each election, with around 2000 responses per survey. The focus here on older Australians, defined as those aged 55 and over, means the number of respondents is cut to around 520. So the results from these data cannot be assumed to be exact, only indicative of possible patterns.

In the 1987 House of Representatives election, older voters seemed to favour the Australian Labor Party (ALP) over the Coalition. Since 1987, the Liberal Party appears to have increased its share of the older vote, winning over half the vote in 1996 (Table 1). In the 1998 election, older voters were less likely to vote Liberal than in 1996, but the majority of those shifting seem to have gone to One Nation and not returned to the ALP.

The National Party vote amongst older Australians in House of Representatives elections was highest in 1987 and lowest in 1993.

After the ALP won over 50 per cent of the vote amongst older Australians in 1987, this support dropped away in 1990. Some was regained in 1993, but since then the ALP vote appears to have hovered around 35 per cent.

In Senate elections (Table 2) between 1987 and 1993, the vote for the Liberal Party amongst older Australians matched their vote for the Liberal Party in House of

Representative elections. Only from 1996 onwards were older voters less likely to vote Liberal in Senate elections compared to House of Representatives elections.

The vote for the National Party in Senate elections amongst older Australians does not appear to be consistently less than their vote for the National Party in House of Representative elections. This is in contrast to overall voting trends, where a general decline in the share of the vote won by the three major parties in Senate elections since 1949 is evident.²

However, older ALP voters have been consistently less likely to vote ALP in Senate compared to House elections. Further, except for 1993, support for the ALP in Senate elections from those aged 55 and over has been in decline and, in 1998, reached its lowest point since 1987.

Some of this ALP vote appears to have gone to the Democrats. The Democrats reached a high point amongst older Australians in the 1990 House election. There was also a significant increase in the percentage of older voters favouring the Democrats in both the 1990 and 1998 Senate elections.

Finally, it appears that the One Nation Party benefited most from disenchanted older Liberal voters, and not older National Party voters in both House of Representative and Senate elections.

The Gender Dimension

A gender gap was apparent amongst ALP voters in 1996, with women less likely than their male counterparts to vote ALP, but this gap had disappeared in 1998 (Table 3). By contrast, older women were more likely to vote Liberal than older men in the 1996 House elections, but this gap closed and reversed slightly in 1998. In Senate elections, older

women were more likely to vote Liberal than older men.

The Democrats appear to do better amongst older women voters in House of Representatives elections, but no gender gap is evident in Senate elections. As with the gender gap overall, the One Nation Party fared better amongst older men than older women.

In conclusion, while it is often assumed that older voters are conservative voters, the 1987 election data presented here indicates this is not always the case. Recent Budget measures also suggest that the Coalition is not taking older voters for granted.

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1. I. McAllister, et al., Social Science Data Archives, ANU.
<http://ssda.anu.edu.au/>
2. Scott Bennett, 'The Decline in Support for Major Parties', *Research Paper*, no. 10, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 1998–99.

Vote in Federal Elections 1987–1998

Table 1: Primary Vote in House of Representatives Elections by Age 1987–1998

	1987		1990		1993		1996		1998	
	55–64	65 plus	55–64	65 plus	55–64	65 plus	55–64	65 plus	55–64	65 plus
Liberal	35.3	33.6	41.8	43.5	46.9	45.4	50.1	54.7	42.8	45.4
National	8.2	9.4	7.1	6.1	3.9	5.7	6.3	5.4	5.2	7.0
ALP	52.4	51.9	34.3	39.0	43.6	44.0	32.7	35.9	35.4	35.9
Democrat	3.7	3.8	13.8	8.9	2.8	2.1	6	2.5	4.4	4.4
One Nation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8.3	5.1

Table 2: Primary Vote in Senate Elections by Age 1987–1998

	1987		1990		1993		1996		1998	
	55–64	65 plus	55–64	65 plus	55–64	65 plus	55–64	65 plus	55–64	65 plus
Liberal	34.9	33.8	40.8	43.6	43.4	44.2	46.8	49.6	35.9	40.5
National	9.6	10.8	6.5	4.9	5.8	6.7	5.0	4.5	5	4.7
ALP	49.0	47.6	33.9	36.5	40.4	38.5	30.2	30.8	27.3	29.8
Democrat	5.0	5.2	14.4	11.7	5.7	5.0	12.7	9.0	18.2	13.4
One Nation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10.5	8.4

Table 3: Primary Vote in House of Representatives and Senate Elections by Gender and Age (55 and over) 1996–1998

	House of Representatives				Senate			
	1996		1998		1996		1998	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Liberal	50.2	52.5	44.8	43.7	44.4	50.5	37.7	39.4
National	6.8	5.4	5.3	7.2	6	3.8	3.7	6.1
ALP	35.6	31.7	35.6	35.7	32.2	28.6	29.3	28.0
Democrat	3.6	6.4	3.6	5.3	11.6	11.7	15.4	15.4
One Nation	-	-	8.2	4.6	-	-	11.0	7.3

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