

ANTI-POLITICS IN AUSTRALIA: HYPOTHESES, EVIDENCE AND TRENDS

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Mass participation in democratic politics emerged at the end of the Nineteenth Century. This was predicated on the widespread acceptance that representative politics, democratic electoral processes, and mass membership parties and trade unions, were central to advancing people's social interests (Mair 2013: 77). This social contract has come under increasing fragmentation in recent decades and is a developing area of research internationally (Stoker *et al.* 2018; Glaser 2018; Wood 2015; Hay 2007).

In many long-term democratic countries, this destabilisation has been linked to a process of anti-politics and the rise of anti-politicians (Stoker 2006: 40). 'Anti-politics' can be broadly understood as the growing mood of public disaffection towards contemporary politics and politicians, and often the mobilisation of that mood by new (or newly re-made) politicians and political projects (Humphrys 2018a). Some highlight the connection between growing anti-political sentiment, or related processes of depoliticisation and populism, and the relinquishment of responsibility for economic planning and governing by politicians and state managers as neoliberalism has advanced (Burnham 2014). However, others situate this political rupture in longer-run developments pre-dating this era, even if they accelerated after the 1970s (Clarke *et al.* 2017).

Australia has not experienced a Brexit, Trump, *gilets jaunes* or Five Star Movement anti-political 'moment'; yet there is a tendency by the media and political pundits to compare or read the situation off that in other

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locations. For example, a 2017 BBC article argued that Pauline Hanson was a contender ‘for the title of Antipodean Trump’ (Marks 2017), and a recent opinion piece in the *Australian Financial Review* argued Australia’s immigration policy is a Brexit waiting to happen (Roggeveen 2019). Rather than presume comparability regarding a potential source for anti-politics in electoral fragmentation, this article examines evidence for this.

We use the approach employed by Peter Mair when examining the long-term democratic countries of the European Union, in his posthumously published *Ruling the Void* (2013), and consider data related to electoral participation, party loyalty, electoral volatility and party membership. Mair (2013: 20) argues that although there is increasing debate about citizen disengagement, ‘both in the scholarly literature and in the popular media, the evidence of this withdrawal is sometimes disputed’. We acknowledge that some of the terrain we cover has already been considered by others (see in particular, McAllister 2011; Denmark *et al.* 2007; Donovan *et al.* 2007). However, we agree with Mair that it is important to conduct an assessment that draws together the various features of popular withdrawal from politics. In doing this, we offer a more comprehensive overview than presently exists in the scholarly literature, and assess the timing of neoliberalism in relation to shifts in citizen disengagement. In doing so, we demonstrate how political decomposition and potential deepening of anti-politics represents a significant political economic challenge in Australia, as it directly impacts the capacity of the political class to execute new projects. This dwindling faculty of political society poses particular challenges when seeking to address global existential threats to humanity, such as climate change or future pandemics akin to COVID-19.

In the first section of this article, we consider approaches to understanding the phenomenon of anti-politics. In section two, we detail our methodology by drawing on Mair’s approach, as well as issues relevant to data availability and quality. In section three, we examine the relevant Australian electoral and party data, and detail our findings. In the conclusion we argue that there is evidence indicating political disengagement and fragmentation is taking place in Australia, potentially underpinning processes of anti-politics. The evidence we present points in the same direction, but Australian electoral institutions (compared to those analysed by Mair) create measurement error, which obscures the distinctiveness of the signal trends. We find that on most indicators, the phenomenon pre-dates the neoliberal era in Australia.

The rise of anti-politics

Anti-political sentiment and large scale anti-political moments are of increasing interest for scholars. Such moments include Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, which were both the result, at least in part, of large-scale mistrust in established political figures (Hobolt 2016; Inglehart and Norris 2016). Vittorio Mete (2010: 39-40) articulates anti-politics as:

made up of the sum of the critical discussions, attitudes and actions directed against political actors and institutions by different individuals who in a variety of roles form part of the political community (political leaders, ordinary people, political militants, journalists, businessmen, exponents of civil society *etc.*). Anti-political criticism particularly focuses on political parties and professional politicians, who are accused of being corrupt, inefficient, parasitic, incapable, arrogant, open to bribery and remote from people's needs.

Thus, anti-politics consists of a broad, and growing, disenchantment amongst the general voting public in liberal democracies and, in particular, the political class (Schedler 1996; 1997; Hay 2007; Clarke *et al.* 2016). As Copland (2019: 4) argues, anti-politics encapsulates the sentiment 'that mainstream political systems are not functioning, and are designed to benefit those who are already in the elite at the expense of "everyday people"'. These sentiments, identified by Mete and Copland, have contributed to the decline of mass participation in democratic politics. This has resulted in decreasing voter participation, a drop in partisan loyalty, growing electoral volatility, and a decline in membership and engagement both with political parties and other civil society actors such as unions.

While deeply linked, the notion of anti-politics differs from similar concepts, in particular 'populism' (Copland 2019). While studies of populism do incorporate both elements, the literature primarily examines the phenomenon utilising a top-down approach (Barr 2009), while anti-politics is more bottom-up (Schedler 1997). Studies of populism primarily examine high-profile maverick leaders who use anti-establishment and anti-elitist messages to gain support. The anti-politics literature, however, examines these feelings amongst the broader populace, studying how populations react against the political class and how political leaders mobilise around this sentiment. Anti-politics, therefore, 'can be seen as one of the main features characterising populism', with anti-politics frequently being 'one of the rhetorical tools used by populist leaders in their public speeches' (Mete 2010: 42-3). In a similar vein, Humphrys and

Tietze (2013) emphasise that anti-politics can be both ‘a widespread mood’ among ordinary people, as well as a ‘political strategy’ mobilising that mood and used by sections (or aspiring sections) of the political class.

With these frameworks in mind, it is useful to understand Mair’s analysis in *Ruling the Void* (2013) as being a version of either anti-politics from below (Metz 2010), or as a reflection of the ‘widespread mood’ among ordinary people (Humphrys and Tietze 2013). Anti-politics, as opposed to populism and other similar concepts, presents a valuable tool to study sentiments held by the broader populace opposing the political class. In doing this, Mair examines a number of indicators through which he thinks it is likely the general population is expressing this general sentiment (or ‘widespread mood’): reduced voter turnout, increased electoral volatility, reduced party loyalties, increased votes for minor parties, falls in party membership and that of civil society organisations (*i.e.* unions).

Methodology

Mair argues the age of party democracy is over. His research details an unmistakable trend in popular disengagement from politics, connected to a ‘generalised anti-political mood across advanced capitalist countries’ (Mair 2013: 3). He argues that although his research and findings focus on the European Union, the lessons and trends are more broadly applicable across advanced capitalist countries (Mair 2013: 8). Utilising a methodology similar to that used to analyse climate change, he argues that in assessing various indicators over time, the small shifts take on a different meaning when considered alongside longer-term trends and multiple criteria. Thus, although the pattern might not be wholly unidirectional, the overall direction and reach of the phenomenon is key (Mair 2013: 26-7).

Our research has examined Australian electoral data across the same indicators as Mair, and in the following we explore evidence for anti-politics as follows: electoral participation (turnout and informal voting); party loyalty (partisanship); electoral volatility (major party first preference votes and consistency of vote); and, party membership (including a consideration of trade union membership). In relation to electoral volatility, we have focussed on the House of Representatives, and have not considered Senate voting patterns. Since government is formed in the lower house, these electoral contests are the location where voters

make their retrospective assessments of government performance (Fiorina 1978).

Aspects of Australian democratic institutions present difficulties to test Mair's thesis, and below we outline some of these characteristics. In the later section on voter turnout, we also discuss the implications of compulsory voting and challenge of measuring the decline in electoral participation.

Data availability and data quality

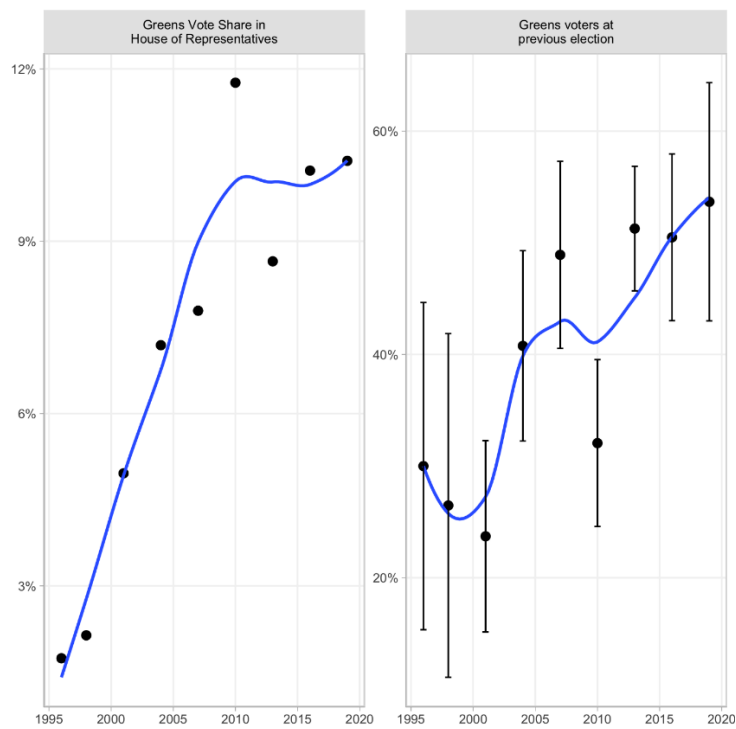
In order to consider the timing of changes to the implementation of neoliberalism, we have sought (where possible) to examine data that commences well prior to the start of the neoliberal era. The Commonwealth body that oversees elections commenced collating and releasing electoral data to the public from 1949. We have, therefore, commenced our analysis of this data from that point. In regard to opinion data, social attitudes surveys rarely provide insight into social attitudes in the pre-neoliberal era, due to when they were conducted. There are also significant issues of data availability and quality regarding membership of Australian political parties, although this is not unusual internationally (Van Haute *et al.* 2018: 369). We have relied on two data sets to analyse party membership. Primarily we have used the international Members and Activists of Political Parties (MAAP) dataset (Van Haute *et al.* 2015). For the Australian Greens, we have used data collated by Stewart Jackson for the period 1989-2012 (Jackson 2011), combined with that provided to us directly by the national office of the Australian Greens for the period 2012-2019. We believe this combined data gives the most complete figures available for the Greens and is more extensive than those in the MAAP dataset.

Defining the major parties

We include the following parties within the category 'major parties': the Australian Labor Party; the Liberal Party of Australia; the National Party of Australia, and the predecessor parties to them in-line with the literature (Jackman 2003). We carefully considered whether to include the Australian Greens as a major party, given its reputation as Australia's 'third major party' in parts of the media narrative (Quinn 2010). This is a

decision that has a significant impact on evaluating the total major party vote over time. An increasing number of Greens voters who had also voted for the Greens at a previous election, alongside an increasing vote overall, could be viewed as an indication of growing stability and the transition of the Australian electoral system from a two-party to a three-party system. Between 1996 and 2016 the number of Greens voters who had voted for them at a previous election increased by 20 percent (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Proportion of Australian Greens voters (%) who voted for the party at the previous election



Source: Australian Electoral Commission; authors' calculations using the Australian Election Study (1996-2019).

We are of the opinion, however, that the formation of the Greens speaks directly to the longer run fragmenting of traditional political structures in Australia. The time period covering the Greens' presence is also historically short, and we are disinclined to draw conclusions about a more fundamental reorganisation of the major parties at this time. On this basis, we have not included the Greens in what we term the 'major parties' for the purposes of our analysis.

In moving to discuss our results, we first examine existent data and discussion of anti-politics in Australia. We then proceed, as Mair did, in considering electoral participation, party loyalty, electoral volatility and party membership in turn.

Anti-politics in Australia?

There has been a growing interest in trust in the Australian political system in recent years. Stoker *et al.* (2018) conducted a systematic review of research on trust in Australian political systems, with data going back to the 1990s. In 2018, they found that fewer than 41 percent of Australian citizens were currently satisfied with the way democracy works, down a staggering 45 points from 86 percent in 2007. They conclude that there is compelling evidence of 'an increasing trust divide between government and citizen [...] and lack of public confidence in the capacity of government to address public policy concerns' (Stoker *et al.* 2018: 9).

While the specific numbers vary, this collapse in trust in Australian political institutions is also commonly found in data from Australian polling agencies (*e.g.* Markus 2014; McAllister and Cameron 2019). Each year, the polling company Edelman conducts international polls examining levels of trust across the globe. In 2019, the survey found that in Australia only 42 percent of the 'general population' trusted government, although this had increased by seven percent since 2018 (Edelman 2019). Some pollsters have found that this distrust goes beyond concern about the specifics of Australian institutions and toward democracy itself. Research prior to the 2016 Australian Federal Election found that only 42 percent of Australians were happy with the way democracy worked (Evans *et al.* 2016). Moreover, this figure may continue to fall as the percentage of those who have little faith in democracy was much higher amongst those aged between 18 and 29 (Oliver 2014).

The Australian Election Study also provides a detailed analysis of electoral engagement (McAllister and Cameron 2019). While the latest survey found small upticks in engagement in the 2019 election compared to 2016 – for example, watching pre-election debates or trying to persuade others how to vote – there remains an overall trend of decreased engagement in Australian elections from the general public. The Study also shows increasing electoral volatility in Australia, including that people made their decision on who to vote for later in the campaign and a significant fall in those who consider themselves ‘lifetime voters’ for one of the two major parties.

Alongside this, some scholars have identified moments of anti-politics in Australia, particularly analysing anti-politics as a political strategy used by members of the political elite to gain support. Much of this literature focuses on populism which, as Mete (2010) points out, is best viewed as an expression of top-down anti-political sentiment. Moffit (2017), for example, argues that there is a specific version of ‘Antipodean’ populism that has developed in Australia and New Zealand. This populism – informed by both countries’ status as settler colonial states and geographically isolated islands – focusses on excluding ‘others’ along material, political and symbolic dimensions; has a producerist notion of ‘the people’; and sets up the ‘elite’, ‘immigrant others’ and ‘Indigenous people’ as triple enemies. Moffit argues that this Antipodean populism has been expressed in Australia through a series of right-wing individuals including Clive Palmer, Jackie Lambie and Bob Katter – but, most particularly, Pauline Hanson (see also Stoker 2006: 134). This populism, however, struggles somewhat due to Australia’s strongly institutionalised electoral system and design of the country’s almost universal bicameral parliaments (save Queensland and the two territories). Populism is also limited because many populist ideas have been adopted by mainstream parties. This mainstreaming of populism was particularly evident in the Howard era from 1996 to 2007 (Sawer and Laycock 2009; Wear 2008; Curran 2004), with the Liberal Prime Minister using rhetoric against ‘special interests’ and ‘liberal elites’ as a core part of his ongoing appeal (Pearse 2017).

Other authors have studied particular moments of the expression of anti-political sentiment in the Australian context. Of particular concern has been Australia’s ‘revolving door of Prime Ministers’, which some argue is partly the outcome of a crisis in domestic politics due to a deep decline in trust in the system (Evans *et al.* 2019). Tietze (2015), in particular, argues

that there has been a hollowing out of the social bases of Australia's major political parties in recent decades, resulting in rolling crises in the political sphere – especially since the election of Kevin Rudd in 2007. Copland (2019) also examines the campaign against the carbon tax, introduced by the Julia Gillard-led ALP Government in 2011, as an example of this form of anti-political campaigning. He outlines how the main figurehead of this campaign, opposition leader, Tony Abbott, tapped into a range of anti-political sentiments (such as distrust in the elite) to oppose the carbon pricing regime.

Humphrys (2019: 227) argues that although the phenomenon of anti-politics predates the rise of neoliberalism, it appears the era of economic reorientation may have accelerated it. However, the lines of causation and relationship require further research. In regards to this research project, we understand neoliberalism to be a state-centred political project, shaped by a macroeconomic approach to reorient national economies in the wake of the 1970s economic crises. Although there is significant national variation, 'more enduring' policies include privatisation and outsourcing, flexible labour markets, deregulation of financial markets and exchange controls, and monetary policy to maintain low levels of inflation (Davidson 2013: 190). In Australia, we consider the start of the neoliberal era to be the 'vanguard' reorientation of economic policy along neoliberal lines, with the election of the Hawke ALP Government in 1983 (Humphrys 2019: 93-101).

Electoral participation

Declining voter turnout at elections

One of the noteworthy features of Australian electoral politics is compulsory voting. It was first introduced at Commonwealth elections in 1924, and Australia remains the only majority English-speaking country to have adopted this policy. Compulsory voting was introduced to address the problem of low voter turnout in the wake of World War I, and Australia has maintained higher voter turnout than comparable democracies as a result (Franklin 1999). While compulsory voting is considered by many to involve the positive integration of citizens into the political process, it is simultaneously a mechanism that compels the integration of civil society (and elements that might be politically disenfranchised) into the functions

of the state. In that sense, it attempts to engender consent for the processes of representative democracy (Humphrys 2019: 40).

Compulsory voting compels citizens by fining those on the electoral-roll who do not cast a vote in Commonwealth, state and local elections. While electors can still choose not to vote, the fine ensures a high participation rate compared to voluntary voting as there is, in effect, no lawful or inexpensive option to exit the process. Demand for voting for a party is no longer conditioned by the priced opportunity cost of voting; instead, it rests on the quality of choices on offer (Hirschman 1970: 23). The implication of this is that trends in electoral participation will not be as prominent or significant as in countries with voluntary voting.

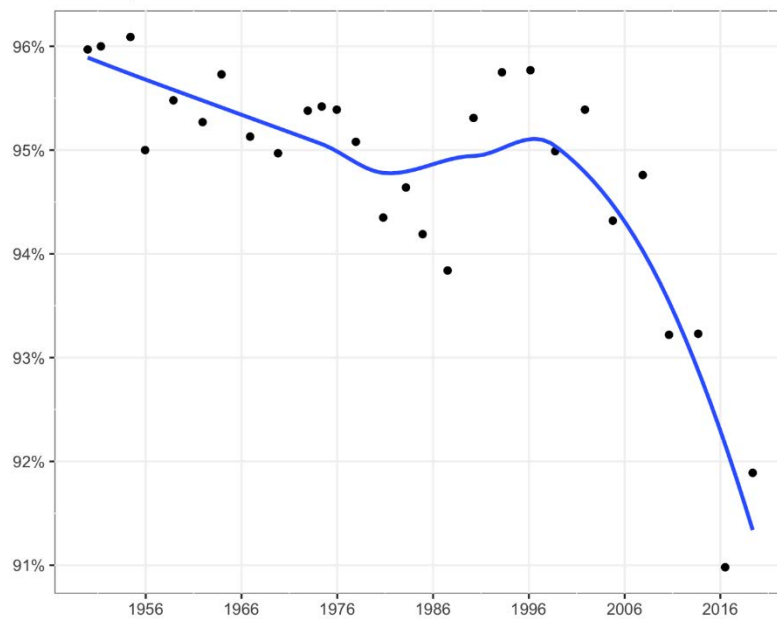
A key indicator of citizen disengagement is electoral turnout, especially when this is considered alongside other forms of mass political behaviour (Mair 2013: 21). Mair argued that declining turnout data across the European counties he examined must be understood as ‘something both unidirectional and pervasive, and that offers a striking indicator of the growing enfeeblement of the electoral process’ (Mair 2013: 26). While he notes that generational replacement may be a factor, where ‘non-participating younger people replace participatory older generations in ever-changing electorates’ (Mair 2013: 23), it could equally be the result of ‘sheer boredom’ (Mair 2013: 26).

In Australia, as detailed in Figure 2 below, voter turnout has been falling. Election turnout remained in the range of 94-96 percent from 1949 until the election of the ALP Rudd Government in 2007, but since then has experienced a noteworthy decline. As the trend line indicates, turnout trended down from 1950-1980, before trending up slightly with higher turnout in the 1990, 1993 and 1996 elections, and then entering a sharper decline.

Various changes to the voting enrolment process in Australia have impacted the percentage of potential voters listed on the electoral roll. Turnout is reported as a percentage of those eligible to vote (*i.e.* enrolled) and, although it has always been compulsory to enrol, this has not been tracked or enforced through penalties (as it is with failing to vote). However, since 2010 a process of direct (‘automatic’) enrolment, using Commonwealth and state government data such as driver’s licences, taxation returns and granting of citizenship, has increased the number of potential voters who are enrolled. Alongside this, factors such as better resourcing of enrol-to-vote drives, have increased the percentage of

potential voters who are enrolled, and this may have impacted what we are observing in terms of turnout. However, even accounting for these factors, it is likely that there has still been a meaningful drop in turnout, while a higher percentage of potential voters enrolled does not exclude the lower turnout connected to political disengagement. Although there was a temporary rise in turnout from the mid 1980s to around the year 2000, the overall trend predates the neoliberal era (despite speeding-up during it).

Figure 2: Turnout (% of all votes), House of Representatives, 1949-2019



Source: Sharman (2020); Australian Electoral Commission (2019).

Note: 1949-2016 data was sourced from the University of Western Australia's *Australian Politics and Elections Archive 1856-2018*, and 2019 data from electoral returns.

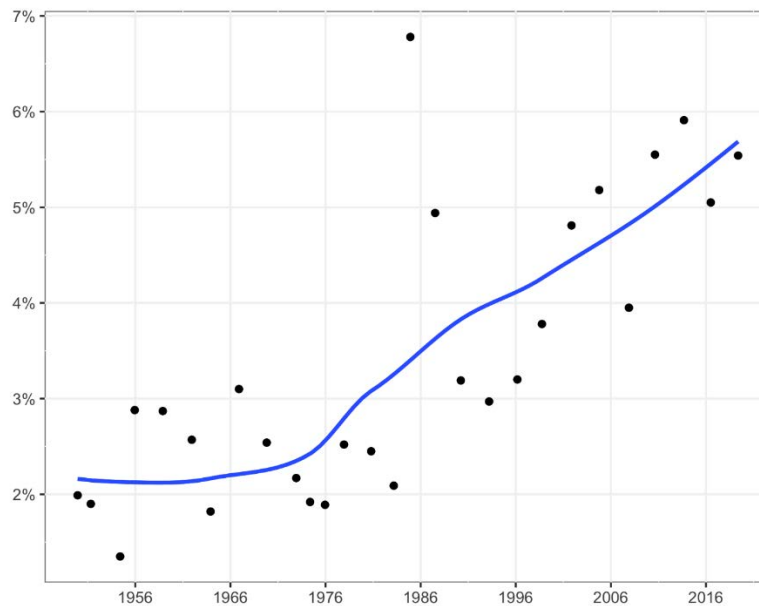
Increasing informal voting

Any level of informal voting calls into question the legitimacy of a democracy's electoral system (Kelly 2012: 54), and Australia has one of the highest rates of informal and spoiled voting amongst long-term democratic countries. This is commonly viewed as a consequence of compulsory voting (Birch 2009; AEC 2003a), and the complexity of the electoral system and ballot completion rules (Mackerras and McAllister 1999: 224-6). In a system of compulsory voting, it is regarded as a 'functional equivalent of non-voting' (Hill and Rutledge-Prior 2016: 401), and Shaun Major argues that 'the informality rate increases under compulsory voting because voluntary abstention is no longer an option' (cited in Medew 2003: 8).

Informal votes fall into two categories: unintentional and intentional. In Australia, unintentional informal votes are 'the result of either defective numbering or the use of ticks or crosses instead of numbers', while intentional informal votes are 'taken to be those that have either been scribbled on or left blank' (Hill and Rutledge-Prior 2016: 401). Informal voting is also linked to the failure of the system to adequately facilitate the votes of all electors. Sally Young and Lisa Hill (2009: 79) argue that a 'significant number of voters are effectively excluded from the electoral process by the high threshold for valid voting', and that these voters 'tend to be drawn from amongst the already socially excluded whose education levels, low literacy/numeracy skills of low English-language proficiency' limit the ability to participate. Jackman (2005) notes that ballot length and informality are related – a relation that becomes stronger with voters from non-English speaking households – and that informality decreases as tertiary education rises.

Between 1901 and 1983, the informal vote was mostly between two and three percent – with the exception of several elections in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when it spiked to four and five percent on several occasions, and in the 1950s-1970s when it occasionally fell slightly below two percent (Australian Electoral Commission 2003b). As Figure 3 illustrates, the informal vote has been increasing since the mid-1970s – prior to the neoliberal era in Australia – and has not been below three percent since the 1996 election. In elections since 1996, it has been above five percent in five of the eight federal elections. At the 2013, election the informal vote was 5.91 percent, in 2016 it was 5.05 percent, and at the 2019 election it was 5.54 percent.

Figure 3: Informal Vote (% total informal votes), House of Representatives, 1949-2019



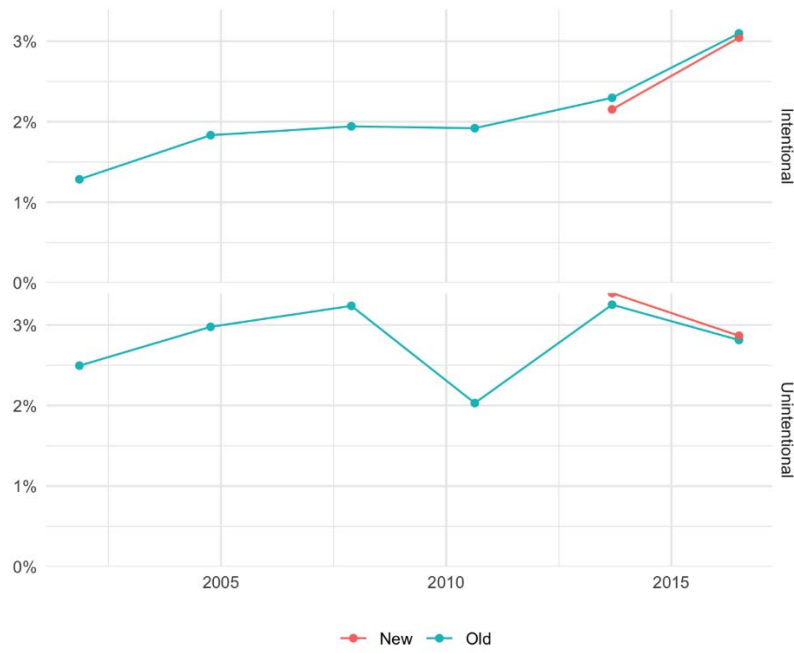
Source: Sharman (2020); Australian Electoral Commission (2019).

Note: 1949-2016 data was sourced from the University of Western Australia's *Australian Politics and Elections Archive 1856-2018*, and 2019 data from the electoral returns.

Although it is 'impossible to be certain of the true intent of informal voters' (Hill and Rutledge-Prior 2016: 401), and as detailed in Figure 4, the proportion of votes assumed to be intentional informal votes has been increasing – although the relatively short time-frame involved means this phenomenon requires further observation. One hypothesis is that young voters are driving the rise in intentional informal voting. Hill and Rutledge-Prior (2016: 412) have assessed aggregate level Census data and the results of the Australian Electoral Study (AES) regarding young people and political disaffection – addressing themes such as interest in politics, trust in politicians, dissatisfaction with democracy and perceived lack of political choice amongst candidates – and conclude that there is 'evidence

for the suspicion that younger voters are playing a key role in the large and apparently rising share of intentional informal votes at Australian national elections'. Moreover, based on the AES, it is reasonable to assume that 'in the absence of alternative legal exit options like "None-of-the-Above" voting', intentional informal voting may be rising as a result of protest and dissatisfaction (Hill and Rutledge-Prior 2016: 413).

Figure 4: Assumed unintentional and intentional informal voting (% total cast votes), House of Representatives, 2001-2016



Source: AEC (2017).

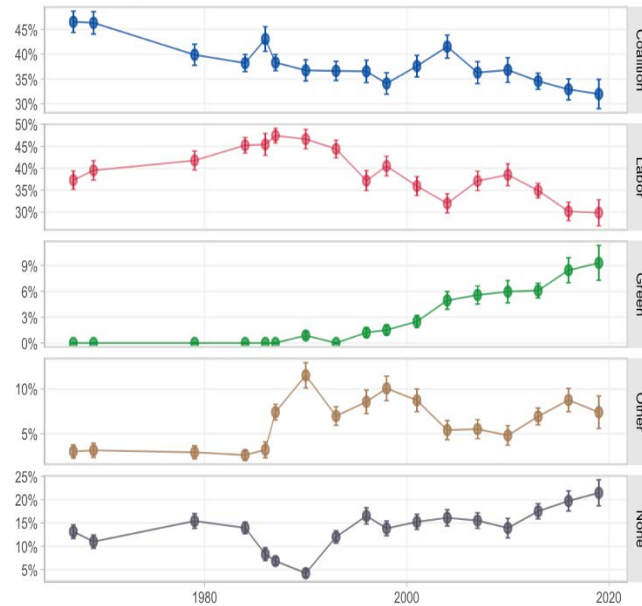
Note: Figures for 2001-2010 use an older AEC definition, and 2013 and 2016 use a refined one. For comparison purposes, the figures in brackets for 2013 and 2016 use the older definition.

Party loyalty

Weakening identification with political parties

To understand trends in party loyalty, we examined survey data regarding partisanship. Since 1966, three national surveys have asked Australians about their identification with Australia’s political parties, and we have combined data from these: Australian National Political Attitudes Surveys (1966, 1969, 1979); National Social Science Survey (NSSS) (1983-1988); and the Australian Election Study (1987-2019). These surveys each ask which parties, if any, a voter identifies with, as well as the strength of that identification. Partisanship measures can be identified in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Partisanship identification as indicated by surveyed voters, 1967-2019



Source: Authors’ calculations; Australian National Political Attitudes Survey (1967-1979); Australian National Social Science Survey (1983-1988); Australian Election Study (1987-2019).

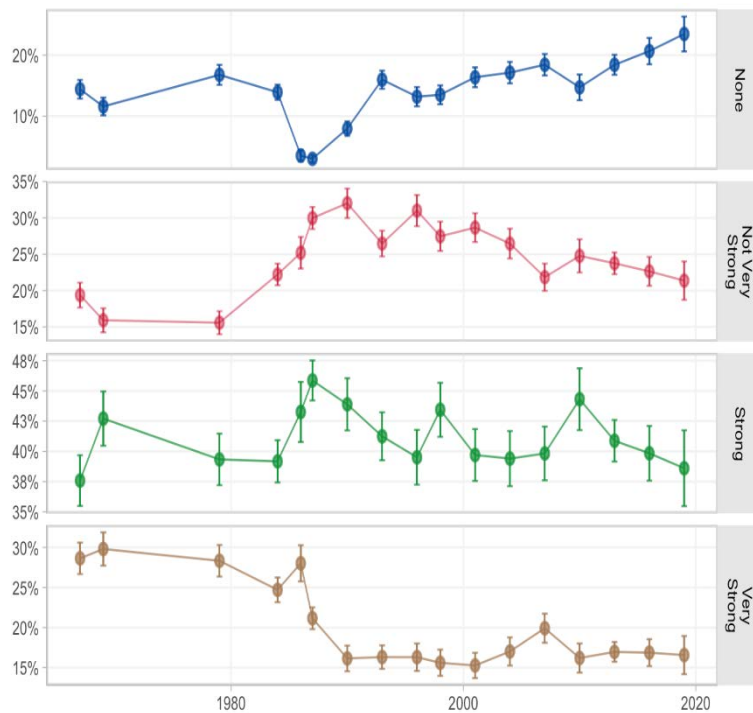
Partisanship is cyclical and follows who is in government at the time. Identification with the ALP, for example, is at its highest during the Hawke/Keating era, while, despite a steady decline, identification with the Coalition sees two small spikes during both the Fraser and Howard Governments. However, there is a clear steady decline in partisan identification for both major parties. After a high of above 45 percent in the late 1960s, identification with the Coalition declined to just above 35 percent during the Hawke/Keating era in the 1980s. After a slight increase during the Howard Government, identification with the Coalition has since declined to 32 percent. Identification with the ALP started below that of the Coalition at 37 percent in the late 1960s. This rose to above 45 percent during the Hawke/Keating era, but has since declined steadily (despite a small rise during the Rudd/Gillard Governments) to 30 percent in 2019.

At the same time as these declines, we can see increasing partisan attachment to the Greens, aligning with their rise as a third major force in Australian politics. In 2019, nine percent of respondents said they identified with the Greens, a new high for the party. Alignment with other parties varies. While these numbers stayed at approximately 1-2 percent in the 1960s-1980s, there is a sharp increase to above 10 percent by the early 1990s. This likely aligns with the rise of the Democrats as a third force in Australian politics at that time. These numbers have then fluctuated, matching the fluctuating fortunes of other parties across this period (as discussed in the section on electoral volatility below). Finally, the percentage of respondents who answered that they do not identify with any party has steadily risen to 21 percent in 2019.

We can also see changing trends in the strength of partisanship, as seen in Figure 6, with the number of people who do not identify with a party rising to 21 percent in 2019. Those who do identify with a party do not identify as strongly as in the past, and those who rate their partisanship as 'very strong' has halved from 30 percent in the late 1960s to only just above 15 percent in 2019.

While party loyalty fluctuates based on who is in government at any particular point of time, through this data we can see a clear and defined decrease in identification with Australia's two major parties. In 2019, a record number of Australians indicated that they did not identify with any party at all. Those who do identify with any party also identify with those parties less strongly, with those who indicate that they have a very strong identification with their party halving in the past thirty years.

Figure 6: Strength of partisanship as indicated by surveyed voters, 1967-2019



Source: Authors' calculations; Australian National Political Attitudes Survey (1967-1979); Australian National Social Science Survey (1983-1988); Australian Election Study (1987-2019).

Electoral volatility

Electoral volatility is an indication of voters' willingness to change their voting behaviour across electoral cycles. The level of volatility, as Mair (2013: 29) explains, describes 'the behaviour of those citizens who do participate, and measures the extent to which their voting patterns reveal consistency and stability over time in the distribution of partisan preferences.' A particular indicator of volatility is that people are more

willing to vote for new parties and new candidates, with these parties and candidates receiving increased success.

Weakening major parties vote

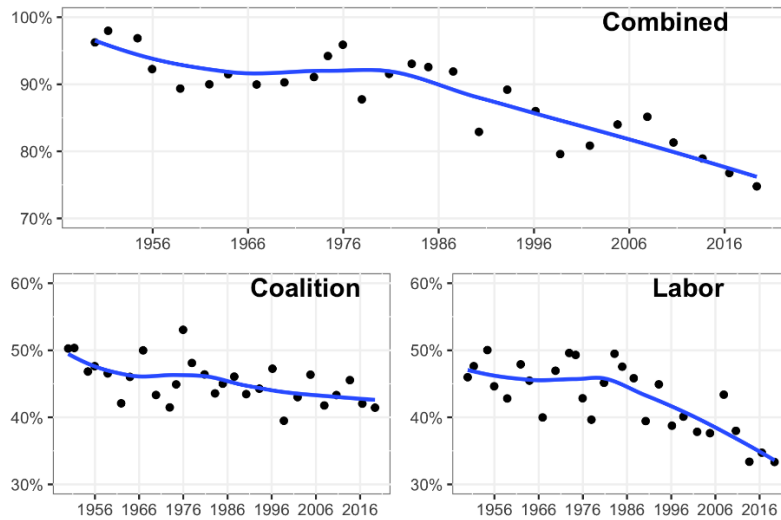
Alongside our other measures, the nature of the Australian electoral system influences our ability to measure electoral volatility. Australian federal elections operate under a compulsory preferential model. Voters in Australia are required to number all candidates on a ballot paper in order of preference in most elections. If a voters' first preference is not successful, their vote transfers to their second, third, fourth *etcetera* preferences. In practical terms, this means that in votes in the House of Representatives, the vast majority of contests, after preferences are distributed, are measured as contests between the two major parties. This is called 'two party preferred' and is measured by the Australian Electoral Commission at a national, state and individual electorate level. The total vote going to the major parties has been in steady decline in Australia since 1980 (see Figure 7 below).

Preferential voting makes it much harder for volatility in voting preferences to destabilise the two-party system. As voters are required to preference all candidates, a vote for a minor party candidate has a lesser impact than in a first-past-the-post system. While, for example, the ALP has worked to regain voters lost to the Greens, they have simultaneously largely been able to rely on those votes to return to them in preferential distributions. In the 2019 election, the flow of these preferences to the ALP was 79 percent (Scales 2019). Compared to first-past-the-post systems, therefore, preferential voting changes the calculus for voters. Preferential voting allows voters to vote for a minor party with less risk of destabilising the system overall. This is why for Labor partisans, the Greens are 'a convenient method of protesting against Labor [...] without making the much more substantial commitment of voting Liberal' (McAllister 2011: 108). However, this can work in two ways, making voters feel either more comfortable voting for a third party as there is less risk of it destabilising the system or, alternatively, discouraging this activity as it is seen pointless precisely because it does not have this destabilising effect.

These trends are impacting both major parties. Figure 7 shows the first preference vote for the Coalition and ALP respectively. First preference votes for the Coalition decreased earlier than the ALP – dropping from just

under 50 percent in the late 1940s to just above 45 percent in the 1960s. After a slight plateau, Coalition votes have since decreased to approximately 41.4 percent by 2019. The Labor Party’s vote remained flat in the early stages of our dataset, up until the early 1980s. It has since seen a steeper drop-off, from just above 45 percent in the early 1980s to 33.34 percent in the 2019 election.

Figure 7: Major party vote (% total votes), House of Representatives, 1949-2019



Source: Australian Electoral Commission.

Part of these differences can be explained by the particularities of the destabilisation in the Australian context. Australia has seen the rise of a number of minor parties in the time period of our data collection, including the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) from 1955-1978, the Democrats (who held seats in the Australian Senate continuously from 1977-2004), One Nation (who rose in the late 1990s and then reappeared again in the 2016 federal election), and the Greens (who first won seats as a national party in 1996 federal election and have seen a steady increase in their vote ever since).

In 2018, the Grattan Institute reported on this rise of minor parties in Australia, focussing on the period after 2004 (Wood and Daley 2018). They concluded that ‘the minor party vote is mostly a protest vote against the major parties: a vote for “anyone but them”’ (p. 3). The Institute argues that this is based primarily on falling trust in government, with minor party voters showing significantly more distrust in government than major party voters. One complication to this, however, is the establishment and rise of the Australian Greens.

The growth of the Australian Greens

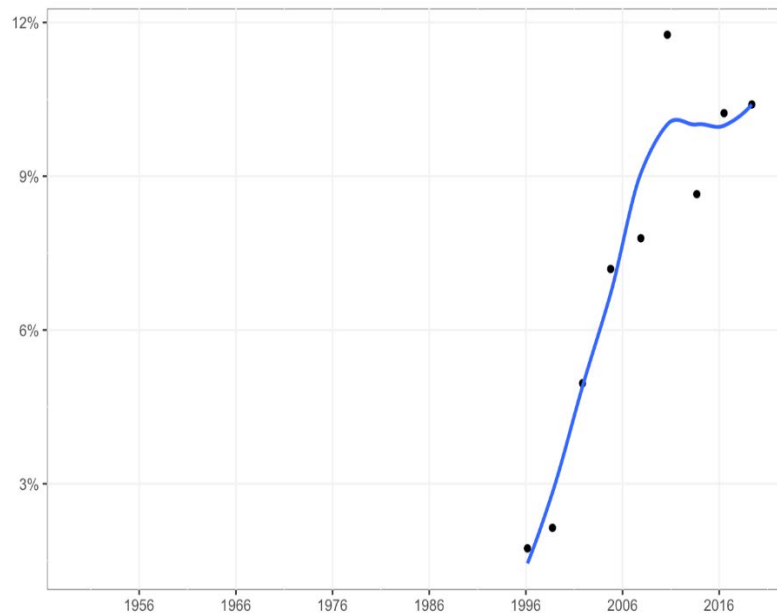
The Greens were formed on the back of the conservation and other social movements of the 1970s and 1980s, federating into a national structure in 1992 – although the West Australian Greens did not join until 2003 (Tietze 2010). The Greens vote and membership surged around 2000, in the context of the Global Justice Movement, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Tampa Affair election in 2001 – where the issue of Australia’s hard-line position on refugees who arrive by boat was central (Tietze 2010; McAllister 2003). The party has grown from 2.92 percent of the national vote in 1996 to consistently being above 10 percent of the vote in elections since 2010, as demonstrated in Figure 8.

While the rapid rise and decline of other minor parties is often directly associated with anti-political sentiments (Grattan Institute 2018), the narrative around the sustained rise of the Greens is less coherent. While a significant proportion of Greens votes – particularly in the party’s early years – were registered as a ‘protest vote’ against the ALP, the party has since established a cohort of stable voters. According to the Australian Election Study (2019), for example, nine percent of the voting population in 2019 aligned themselves as having Greens partisanship, a rise from only one percent in 1996. This has led some (*e.g.* Grattan Institute 2018) to argue the Greens now display more traits of a ‘major party’ than a ‘minor party’. While in the early stages the Greens’ success was based primarily on a protest vote, their recent stabilisation can also be seen to be due to a re-alignment on the left side of politics (Farrell 2020).

Whether one is persuaded by the protest vote or re-alignment arguments, the rise of the Greens is relevant to anti-politics as it demonstrates volatility in the traditional two party system. The Greens have eroded the social base of the ALP, disrupting their ability to forge ongoing stable

governance and undermining the labourism at the heart of Australian political life for over a century.

Figure 8: Australian Greens primary vote (% of all votes), House of Representatives, 1996-2019



Source: Australian Electoral Commission.

We can therefore see a clear declining vote for both major parties over time, combined and separate. There is disruption on both the left and right – with minor parties such as Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, alongside conservative independents, disrupting the right side of politics, while the Greens remain the main dislocating force on the left. There is an evidently growing volatility in the Australian electoral system, with voters being more inclined to vote for minor parties. However, unlike in Europe, this volatility is having less impact on the stability of the two-party system due to the preferential system – which has reinforced the two-party system. This does not mean, however, that Australia’s major parties have remained

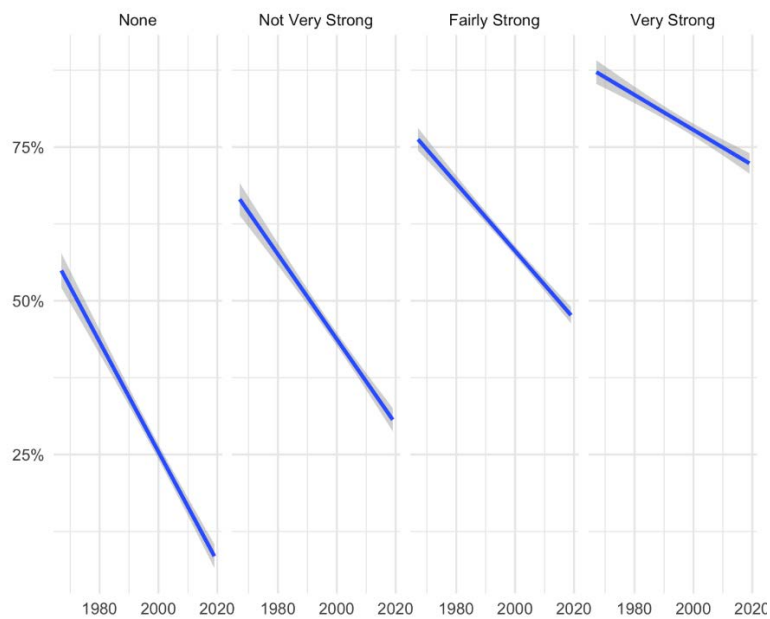
stable. Unable ‘to rely on a serious social base and facing an electorate that has stopped seeing the political system as representative of its interests’, increased volatility has seen ruptures within the internal operations of both parties, epitomised by the revolving door of Prime Ministers from 2010 to 2018 (Tietze 2015). The political crisis arises because political classes no longer have authority from civil society to carry out reform. As Tietze argues, for most of the twentieth century political structures in Australia were buttressed by major parties with relatively stable social bases who had well-defined ideological differences. The present decomposition means parties are less tied to those they purport to represent and will ‘often pander to the ideological obsessions of their most fervent supporters, leading them to be even less relevant to mainstream voters’ (Tietze 2015). This has led to factional battles over party leadership positions on both sides of the aisle that bear little connection to what is happening in the electorate.

The unreliable voter

Australians have become less consistent with their long-term voting practices. Voters support parties that they have predispositions towards or with whom they share an affinity. Identification with a party, for the most part, is the best predictor of long-term support, with the stronger the support the more reliable the voter. Figure 9 reveals that the relationship between partisan strength and consistent voting has weakened since the late 1960s. A weak-partisan would always support one party over 65 percent of the time in 1967; though this figure dropped to 30 percent by 2019. The 35 percent decline in reliability for weak-partisans is only somewhat larger than the 25 percent and 15 percent declines for mid-strength and strong-partisans. If partisanship is the glue of the party system, not only are there now less partisans, but their effectiveness in stabilising the party system has weakened.

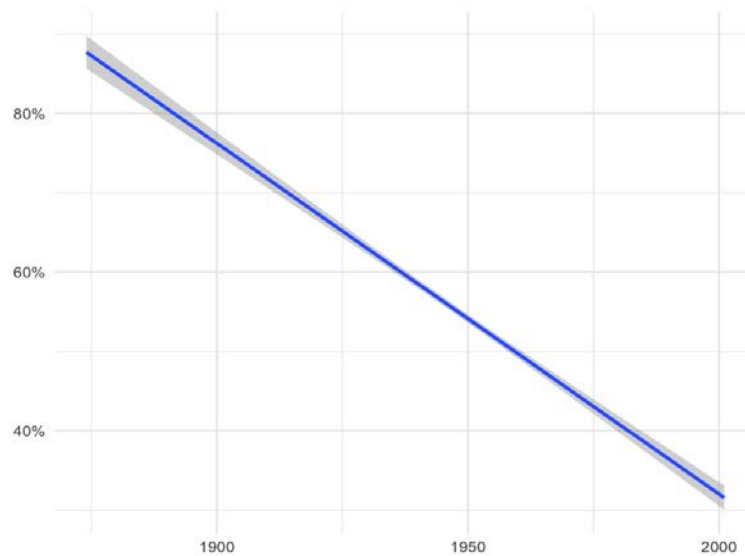
The decline in consistent voting is largely a product of reduced transmission of partisanship through parental socialisation. In other words, children are less likely to vote for the same party as their parents than was the case historically. This is the case both in Australia (McAllister 2011: 49) and internationally (Aldrich *et al.* 2020).

Figure 9: Consistent voting (% of all voter) by partisan identity strength, 1967-2019



Source: Australian National Political Attitudes Surveys (1967-79); Australian Electoral Study (1987-2019).

Figure 10 pools five decades of survey data, which shows a predacious decline in consistent voting between each generation. This reflects the greater electoral options available to voters and perhaps greater political sophistication. There are clear implications for the stability of the party system, with younger voters increasingly more unreliable for major parties.

Figure 10: Consistent voting (% of all voter) by birth year, 1967-2019

Source: Australian National Political Attitudes Surveys (1967-79); Australian Electoral Study (1987-2019).

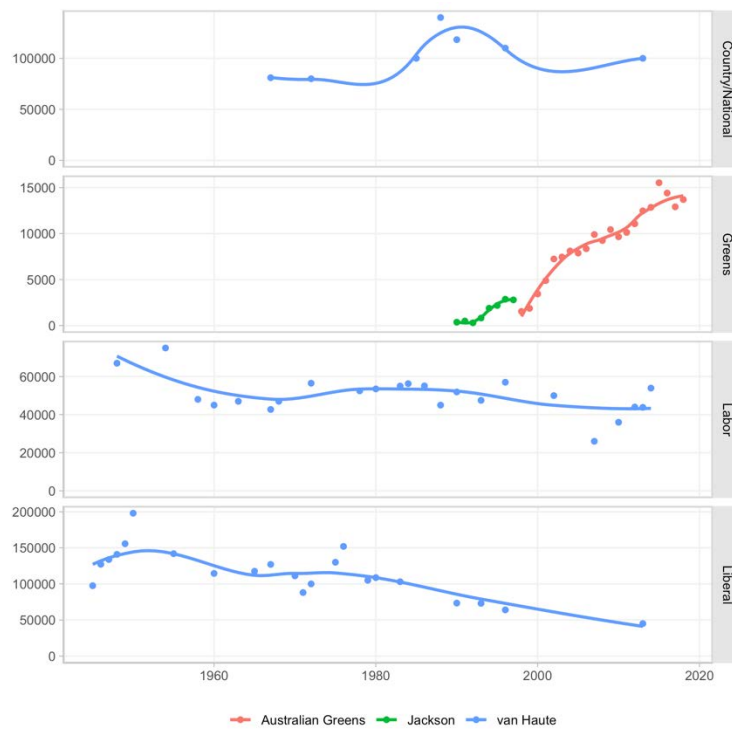
Party membership

Declining membership of traditional political parties

With no state-mandated requirement to disclose membership numbers, and most parties keen to keep this information private, data is erratic and limited – often only becoming available when ‘leaked’ by senior party activists. However, information in the MAAP project dataset shows that the two major parties have seen a significant decline in membership since they were founded. The data we present below is the absolute membership numbers, not as a proportion of the total population. Considering Australia’s growing population, the decline in membership is even more dramatic than it first appears.

Although the ALP was formed in 1901, there is only sporadic data available (see Figure 11). In 1954, the ALP had 75,000 members, after which membership declined over time. Membership was 67,000 in 1948 (where the figures we use start) and has largely remained in the higher 40,000s to lower 50,000s until now. Membership declined more sharply from 50,000 in 2002 to 26,000 in 2007, after which it recovered to just shy of 54,000 in 2014.

Figure 11: Membership of ALP, Liberal Party, Country-National Party and Australian Greens, 1940-2019



Source: (Australian Greens 2019; Van Haute *et al.* 2015; Jackson 2011).

The Liberal Party, formed in 1945, built its membership from an initial base of almost 100,000 to a high of 198,000 in 1950. Since then, and particularly after 1983, membership has declined to now sit at an historic low of 45,000 in 2013. The Liberal's coalition partner, the National Party (and its predecessor the Country Party), has maintained a large membership of 80,000 or more between 1967 and 2013. Membership was at its highest in this period in 1988 when it reached 140,000, but declined to 100,000 in 2013. However, in combining the membership of the Liberal, Country and National Parties over time, there remains a significant overall decline.

Cutting against this trend has been the establishment of the Australian Greens, whose membership has grown slowly since its early national electoral successes to sit at just above 13,696 in 2018/19 – after a high point of 15,523 in 2015/16. This growth in party membership must be seen in context, however, relative to the far-larger memberships of the legacy parties in the ALP, Liberals and Nationals/Country Party. Numerous parties on the Right have formed since the 1990s, but they have mostly been both relatively transient and not of significant size. The One Nation party had a fast-growing membership in the fourteen months after it was set up, although this later declined when Pauline Hanson left parliament. The party claimed to have over 25,000 members at its peak (Watson 2000: 91). Thus, while there has not been a stable minor party on the right, there are clear signs of political instability and fracturing.

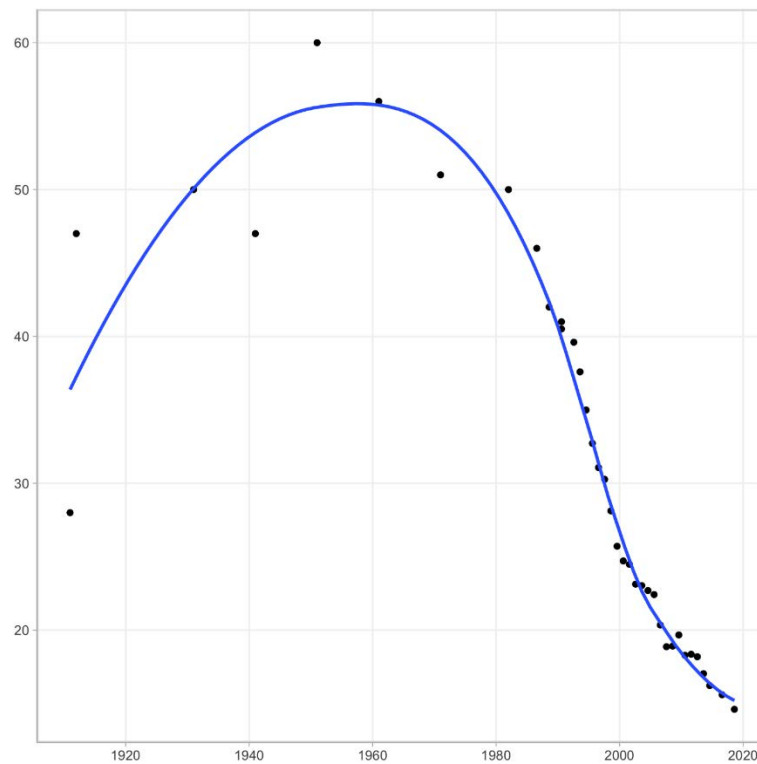
As Figure 11 indicates, the decline in membership of the ALP and Liberal Parties predates the neoliberal era in Australia, and even the very early period of neoliberal policy making internationally in the mid-late 1970s. This is particularly pronounced in relation to the ALP, with its significant decline in membership occurring prior to 1970.

Declining union membership

Although Mair mentions the decline of unions and other civil society organisations, a focus on organised labour is important in locations where mass politics has been deeply shaped by labourism and where trade unions have rights and responsibilities (including voting rights) inside the electoral arm of the labour movement. The formation and growth of trade unions was an important facet in the integration of 'the masses' into political society and construction of political hegemony (Humphrys 2019).

Mass politics was organised through mass parties and, in turn, mass parties gained stability through socio-political institutions such as trade unions, churches and social clubs (Inglehart and Norris 2016: 11; Mair 2013: 78). The decline of civil society organisations, most particularly trade unions in Australia, has undermined the social weight of the section of the political class that was connected to those formations.

Figure 12: Trade union membership density, 1911-2018



Source: 1985-2010: Humphrys (2019); 1986-1993: ABS, *Trade Union Members*, cat. no. 6325.0; 1994-2013: ABS, *Employee Earnings Benefits and Trade Union Membership*, cat. no. 6310.0; 2014-2018: ABS, *Characteristics of Employment*, cat. no. 6333.0.

In Australia, union density steadily grew from Federation and reached 47 percent in 1921. Density did not drop back below this figure until the late 1980s. For much of the period, from 1921 to 1990, 50 percent of Australian workers were members of trade unions (Figure 12). From the mid 1980s, trade union density has continued to fall. Various changes contributed to the decline in union membership – particularly global and national economic structural adjustment, deindustrialisation, the end of ‘closed shops’, macroeconomic factors such as protracted higher unemployment, and the introduction of the ALP -ACTU Accord social contract (Humphrys 2018b; Svensen and Griffin, 1996). The decline in union membership also occurred in a context of a mobilisation against organised labour by key elements of political society and the business sector, which included changes to legislation and civil action against workers’ organisations (Humphrys 2018b).

In the context of anti-politics, the dramatic decline in union membership, alongside very low levels of industrial struggle, has undermined a key location of political activity and involvement in Australian society. More specifically, trade unions were once an important formation that facilitated the involvement of the working class in the functioning of politics. Whether trade union decline is a contributing cause of political detachment, a symptom of it, or both as part of a complex feedback process, is a question that requires further research. What is clear, however, is that the social base of the ALP in the trade unions has declined and been eroded – not only are there fewer union members, but the leadership of the unions and the ALP is far less connected to the membership of either than previously.

Conclusion

Anti-politics – both a generalised mood of political detachment and hostility, and the capturing of that mood by political candidates and movements – is a key political issue in many advanced capitalist countries. Underpinning anti-politics is a process whereby citizens are spurning previously established forms of participation in the electoral process and traditional political parties. These processes shape the ability of the political class to undertake political economic reform to meet urgent national and global challenges.

We have found that there is evidence for a decline in democratic engagement in Australia on the indicators set out by Mair, although the form it takes is particular to the context. A clear breakdown in the social basis of support for the two-party system that has dominated since Federation is occurring, with patterns of partisanship appreciably disrupted in the last three to four decades. It is also possible to determine increasing voter volatility, with voters more willing to vote for minor parties (although volatility has a different effect on Australian politics due to the nature of preferential voting). Partisanship levels in Australia are also seeing a steady decline, with voters both less inclined to identify with political parties, and identifying with them less strongly when they do. Membership of the ALP and Liberal Parties has been in significant decline since the mid-1950s, and there has been a dramatic decline in trade union density over the last forty years.

Our analysis has revealed that processes of electoral and political party disengagement predate the neoliberal era, although on some indicators accelerated during that period. The decline in voter turnout and increase in informal voting both predate the neoliberal era. The fall in turnout has accelerated in the neoliberal period, but the rise in informal voting was similar prior to and during that era. The weakening of political partisanship and increase in voter volatility changes have both accelerated in the neoliberal period. In the case of party membership, the decline of the ALP and Liberal Parties well precedes the neoliberal era. The decline in union density pre-dates the neoliberal era, but an acceleration of the decline coincides with it.

We conclude that there is clear evidence to support the claim that a process of popular withdrawal and disengagement from conventional politics is occurring in Australia, similar to that occurring in the long-term democracies in Europe. As with Mair's findings, the small shifts detailed on individual criteria take on a different meaning when considered alongside longer-term trends and multiple criteria. Moreover, and similar to the analysis set out in *Ruling the Void*, although the pattern in Australia is not wholly unidirectional, the overall direction and reach of the phenomenon is unmistakable. This is of crucial importance in assessing smaller movements on some of the measures above, which would take on less significance if they were isolated occurrences.

How popular withdrawal and disengagement from traditional politics is related to anti-politics will hopefully be the subject of further research in

Australia. The import of this for political economy is understanding that policy reform of the scope and nature required to address significant national and global challenges – including the existential threat of climate change – cannot be implemented by a fractured political class. Moreover, whether the structures of representative politics common to the highly industrialised countries can (or even should) be repaired, or whether new forms of democratic decision-making and participation will emerge, must be at the heart of these discussions.

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