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Election Report: Australia

[Geoffrey Robinson](#) has very kindly written a post for us, telling everything you ever wanted to know about today's election, but were afraid to ask. Over to Geoffrey

Australia has a bicameral national legislature. The 150 members of the House of Representatives are elected from single-members constituencies by instant run-off voting, known in Australia as preferential voting. The Senate has almost equal powers to the House of Representatives and comprises 12 senators from each of the six states together with 2 senators from each territory. Six senators from each state and all of the territory senators are elected at each election. The states differ wildly in size but compared to almost any other federation levels of party support are remarkably uniform. Senators are elected by Single Transferable Vote. The result has been that in recent decades the membership has been more [representative](#) of public opinion than the House of Representatives.

Voting is compulsory for enrolled voters although levels of enrolment among the citizen population [have declined](#) . During the election campaign unenrolled citizens won court decisions to [online enrolment](#) and an [extension of time](#) for voters to enrol. Together with a [2007 case](#) on prisoners' voting rights these decisions may foreshadow a greater role for the courts in electoral administration.

The ALP remains a party based on trade union affiliation. Its individual membership has declined sharply in recent decades but was always low by international standards and it like other parties has become more dependent on business donations and public funding. The 1983-96 Labor government presided over major neo-liberal economic policy reforms and trade union membership has dramatically declined in recent decades, however trade union officials remain prominent in the party and well represented among Labor MPs. The last thirty years have been the period of Labor's greatest political success. As [Don Aitkin](#) predicted in 1982 the decline of religion, an increasingly culturally diverse population and the increased entry of women into the workforce have all favoured Labor.

Since the 1920s the conservative side of the Australian political spectrum has been occupied by an almost continuous coalition of the Liberal Party and its predecessors together with the agrarian National (formerly Country) Party. The decline in the rural population has seen a steady decline in the National Party but its social conservatism and Greenhouse 'scepticism' has been [influential within the Coalition](#). In recent years the Liberal Party has tacked to the right, particularly under the leadership of John Howard Prime Minister 1996-2007, the first Liberal leader to avow himself a conservative.

The two major Coalition victories of 1996 and 2004 saw the conservatives make notable gains among manual workers and non-Anglo migrants who had traditionally supported Labor. If Americans asked What's the Matter with Kansas? Australian observers asked what's the matter with Lindsay? Here the reference was to a traditionally Labor Sydney electorate held by the Liberals 1996-2007. Few remembered that "David Kemp": <http://www.librarything.com/work/275680/1522931> , Harvard PhD graduate, Monash University political scientist and Howard government minister had been the first to argue, as long ago as 1978, that Australian politics would increasingly be dominated not by class issues but by a conflict between a conservative majority and a liberal knowledge elite. An unacknowledged version of Kemp's thesis came however to dominate much qualitative

commentary from both left and right on the Howard government. Observers identified John Howard's routine patriotic homilies on national identity as [weapons of a master cultural warrior](#). This interpretation of John Howard's success reached fever pitch after the 2001 election. The Coalition government's draconian policies against the modest trickle of asylum-seekers and its stringent anti-terrorism legislation were strongly supported by voters and received the reluctant acquiescence of the Labor opposition. More quantitatively inclined observers were doubtful about Howard's unique appeal but they did [identify a pattern](#) of increased Coalition support among some groups that had traditionally supported Labor. The cultural interpretation of Coalition successes had some influence on Labor whose leaders during their eleven years in opposition downplayed the social liberalism of the 1983-96 Labor government in favour of a focus on 'bread and butter' issues. The return of the Howard government with an increased majority in 2004 and control of the Senate for the first time since 1980 inspired many to identify a new conservative hegemony but the political wheel turned quickly. Labour market reforms proved deeply unpopular, as did the government's refusal to ratify the Kyoto protocol. In December 2006 former diplomat Kevin Rudd took over the Labor leadership, Labor rapidly established a clear poll lead over the Howard government and cruised to victory at the November 2007 election.

Labor's electoral monopoly of the political left has been challenged by the rise of the Greens who brought together local environmental campaigners and leftists disenchanted with the centrism of the 1983-96 Labor governments. The Greens major electoral breakthrough came in 2001 when they attracted significant support from former Labor voters disenchanted with their party's acquiescence in the draconian policies of the Howard government against asylum-seekers.

Another significant development has been growing support for independent candidates, particularly in rural areas from voters disenchanted with the increasing dependence of the National Party on the Liberals. Three formerly safe National party electorates are represented by independents all of whom were once members of the National Party.

Labor's October 2007 victory sparked euphoria comparable to that of Barack Obama on the political left. But like the Democrats Labor found it difficult to deliver on popular expectations. The new government faced a Senate where the Coalition numbers were inflated by those Senators elected in 2004. The Coalition together with the one Senator from the Christian conservative family First party comprised half the membership of the Senate and was able to block any government legislation.

The Labor government believed that the electoral repudiation of Howard's conservatism in 2007 would encourage a chastened opposition to tack the centre. For a time this seemed the case the opposition accepted the reversal of the Howard government's unpopular labour market reforms and backed early stages of the government economic stimulus action to respond to the Global Financial crisis. However Prime Minister Rudd would eventually be brought undo by a confluence of four issues.

The government had won election on a pledge to ratify the Kyoto protocol and to introduce an Emissions Trading Scheme to reduce carbon pollution. The government hoped to win the support of the Coalition for its plans. The question divided the Coalition, in particular the Liberals between moderates such as then party leader Malcolm Turnbull and conservatives who cleaved to right-wing 'scepticism' on the issue of climate change. Eventually in October 2009 Turnbull was overthrown and replaced as Liberal leader by Tony Abbott. Under

Abbott's leadership the Coalition rallied against the ETS and defeated it in parliament. The government considered an early election on the issue but in April 2010 announced that it would delay any further action until at least 2013. The back down generated a storm of media criticism but government strategist believed that voter support for action on greenhouse emissions was shallow and would quickly wither in the face of an opposition campaign against the ETS as a 'big new tax'.

Support for the government was also undercut by controversies around the administration of its economic stimulus program. Here perhaps the government was a victim of success, the program was widely credited by economists for contributing to Australia's strong economic performance during the Global Financial Crisis. However an acrimonious controversy developed over two aspects of the stimulus: programs for the construction of new school buildings and to subsidize home insulation installation. Critics pointed to cost overruns and deaths that resulted from an influx of unqualified installers into the home installation business. As the immediate fear of economic collapse passed the Coalition made steady ground on the theme of waste and mismanagement.

Many in the media blamed Labor's declining support on its refusal to stand by the ETS but controversies about immigration were also significant. A marked increase in the number of asylum-seekers who arrived by boat was blamed by the opposition on the government. The opposition claimed that Labor's modest softening of the Howard's government's 'border protection' policies had merely encouraged asylum-seekers. Fuel was added to the fire by the Prime Ministers enthusiastic support vision of an Australian population of 36 million by 2050. Some observers doubted that immigration would be a significant issue for voters once an election was called but the government did not, during 2010 it scrambled to tighten policy on asylum-seekers.

In May 2010 the government received a major report on taxation reform undertaken by the head of the Treasury Department. The government announced its intention to legislate for a new Resource Super Profits Tax as proposed in the report. The new tax generated a storm of opposition. It was widely blamed for falling voter support for Labor in the resource-rich states of Queensland and Western Australia. The tax saga illustrated the theses of Charles Lindblom on business power and Richard Bensen on economic sectionalism.

The result was a political perfect storm. Labor support in opinion fell steadily during 2010. Panicked Labor MPs rallied behind deputy PM and Education Minister Julia Gillard as an alternative to Rudd. Once cast as a political genius who had lead Labor from the wilderness Kevin Rudd, rather like Barack Obama today, was now judged by many to have feet of clay.

The election campaign has pitted against each other two leaders who share a common pragmatism despite their different background. Julia Gillard's status as an childless unmarried atheist briefly inspired enthusiasm from left-leaning voters but she has demonstrated a Clintonite enthusiasm for triangulation and framing, she felt the pain of voters fearful of asylum-seekers and pledged not to legislate on a carbon tax or revived Emissions trading Scheme without a public consensus. The Resource Super Profits Tax was withdrawn and replaced by a much more modest proposal than won the acquiescence of the larger mining companies. The government announced that it favoured the establishment of an offshore processing center for asylum-seekers rather than that they be permitted to land in Australia. Gillard nominated Thomas Friedman as one of her [favourite authors](#).

Tony Abbott's devout Catholicism and aggressive style has enthused the conservative base in Australia and attracted favourable attention overseas, but his pledge not to revive the unpopular labour law reforms of the Howard government disappointed business conservatives and he showed little enthusiasm for any reduction in social welfare expenditure. [Lord of the Rings](#) is his favourite book. During the campaign Labor with debatable sincerity sought to steer the debate about asylum-seekers to a broader debate about 'sustainable' population growth, whilst the Coalition trumpeted their plan to 'stop the boats', even although in the past Abbott had drawn on Catholic conservative traditions to defend cultural diversity and the contribution of Muslims to Australian life. Business conservatives accused both parties of turning their backs on decades of successful immigration policy.

However there remained clear points of divergence. The government continued to defend its economic stimulus program even as it competed with the opposition to promise a faster return to budget surplus. Labor trumpeted its commitment to health and education, particularly on the later it offered a New Democratic and New Labour style synthesis of increased funding together with greater accountability. As Education minister Gillard presided over the introduction of a [website](#) to enable parents to compare school performance. Critics described Gillard's priorities as more those of a state Premier rather than a national prime Minister. Labor also trumpeted its support for ambitious publically funded National Broadband Network to deliver super-fast internet services which the Coalition rejected as extravagant.

Labor's policies on asylum-seekers and on climate change disappointed many on the left and have encouraged an increase in support for the Greens. The party seems on track to secure increased representation and a likely balance of power in the Senate and to win a House of Representatives electorate for the first time at general election.

Since May 2010 Labor (once the second preferences of Green voters are counted) and the Coalition have been almost equal in public support. The closeness of support for the sides during the campaign encouraged a frenzy of opinion polling, including the widespread use of robocalls for the first time and an avalanche of poll analysis to the exclusion of policy examination. Bloggers such as [Pollytics](#) following the example of [FiveThirtyEight](#) have been prominent. Much of this discussion has largely failed to consider academic research on electoral behaviour, such as the Australian Election Survey undertaken since 1987, which has consistently found that party identification remains the major driver of electoral choice followed by policy preferences with attitudes towards party leaders much less significant than the media considers. Gillard and Abbott are both viewed positively by voters, Labor may have hoped that Gillard's gender would encourage support from female voters and there is some evidence of this. The Coalition is strongly favoured on immigration and Labor on health and education, but on the issue of economic management Labor has made up ground across the campaign.

Two days out the pattern is unclear with aggregate national polls consistently showing Labor narrowly ahead after the distribution of the preferences of Green voters. Recognition that a narrow majority of support from voters did not necessarily translate into a majority of seats has inspired much marginal seat polling and consideration of divergent swing patterns across the states. Aggregate polling predicts little swing from 2007 but [seat level polling](#) predicts an extraordinary range of electoral shifts both towards and against the government. Some predict that the novelty of a female Prime Minister, the divergent political cultures of the states and the varying popularity of state governments, will encourage widely divergent electoral trends across the nation. However as in the [United States in 2008](#) the 2010 Australian election may after all the drama be a case of electoral politics as usual.