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Monday 27 September 2004

Coming to the party: How we vote

What do we *really* know about the people who vote for the major political parties in Australia?

A new study by ANU economist Dr Andrew Leigh, from the Research School of Social Sciences, has found that income, age and country of birth are important predictors of how we vote.

Dr Leigh evaluated data from post-election surveys of 14,000 voters between 1966 and 2001, examining 10 federal elections. He applied a unique method to the analysis, looking at individual voting behaviour, rather than comparing voting patterns across electorates.

“In 2001, richer voters were more likely to vote for the Coalition. The richest fifth of voters were 28 per cent more supportive of the Coalition than the poorest fifth. The gap in voting patterns between rich and poor also seems to have widened over time,” Dr Leigh said.

Dr Leigh also looked at the characteristics of swing voters, noting that about 10 per cent of the population changes their primary vote from one election to the next. His research finds that younger voters, male voters and overseas-born voters are more likely to swing, but do not differ from party loyalists in terms of income or education.

Other main findings of the study include:
· Women were 10 per cent more likely than men to vote for the Coalition in the 1960s, but this partisan gender gap appears to have disappeared in recent elections. In line with trends in the United States, Australian women have steadily become more left wing.
· In 2001, voters aged 50-59 were 18 per cent more likely to vote for the Coalition than voters aged 18-29, while voters aged 60 and over were 25 per cent more likely to support the Coalition. This partisan age gap has more than doubled since 1966.
· Foreign-born voters are now 15 per cent more likely to support Labor than Australian-born voters. In the 1960s, there was little difference in voting patterns between these groups.

Your neighbourhood also appears to have an effect on voting patterns. “Voters in more affluent neighbourhoods are likely to support the Coalition, while voters in more unequal or ethnically diverse neighbourhoods are more likely to support Labor,” Dr Leigh said.

Dr Leigh’s paper *Economic Voting and Electoral Behaviour: How do Individual, Local and National Factors Affect the Partisan Choice?* is available from http://econrsss.anu.edu.au/~aleigh/.

It will be presented at the Conference of Economists at the University of Sydney on today and at the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference at the University of Adelaide on Friday, 1 October.

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Gold was bold, but it's not enough to win

By Peter Hartcher, Political Editor
October 2, 2004

Mark Latham's big, bold announcement this week that Labor would spend almost $2 billion a year to give free hospital care to everyone aged over 75 was a stunning attempt to win next Saturday's election. Can it work?

When one of the country's main senior citizens' lobbies held a meeting in Brisbane yesterday, it soon became clear that Latham still has a lot of work to do if he wants his Medicare Gold plan to be electorally potent.

David Deans, the joint chief executive of COTA-National Seniors - membership 300,000 - called the meeting of 10 of the group's representatives from regional Queensland.

"I was interested to see what people thought so I decided to just let people talk about it for a few minutes and I asked them what they thought of the Medicare Gold policy," Deans said. "The first question was, 'Which party has put that policy forward?' There was confusion in the room about whose policy Medicare Gold is. These are thinking people, who work with these issues all the time."

His point? Even among people active in the seniors lobby, even in the state where the policy was launched, even two days after the announcement, there was a low level of understanding of Labor's big plan.

The policy is plainly a net plus for Labor. It is simple and big and full of promise.

It also demonstrates, once more, Latham's style as an aggressive and unconventional politician. Rather than accept the existing alignments and loyalties in Australian politics, he is prepared to challenge them.

The elderly vote is a Howard constituency. People aged 55 and over were prepared to vote for the Coalition over Labor by 60 per cent to 40, according to the average of the past three *Herald Polls*.

Latham refuses to cede this territory to Howard. Medicare Gold and the other pro-elderly policies released this week are a raid to steal votes from Howard's heartland.

But as David Deans's meeting shows, it is a big job. Latham has to tell voters that his policy exists. Second, he has to persuade them that it is feasible. Third, he has to persuade them that it is enough to compel them to change their voting intentions. And he has only a week in which to do it.

And even if he can do all this, it is still, by itself, unlikely to clinch the election. Consider the numbers.

We know that 7 per cent of voters aged 60 and over switched parties at the last federal election. And we know that this is consistent with historical experience since 1966, according to the Australian National University economist Andrew Leigh.

Let's assume that this typical 7 per cent grey swing occurs next Saturday. And, for the sake of the exercise, let's assume that these voters all swing to the Labor Party. What effect would this have?

"For every 3 per cent of the older voters he can pull away from Howard, he will get an extra 1 per cent on the national vote for Labor," calculated the *Herald* pollster, AC Nielsen's John Stirton.

So even if every one of the swinging older voters moved to vote for Labor, this 7 per cent would translate into a shade above 2 per cent extra for Labor's share of the vote. Labor needs a uniform swing of 2.2 per cent to win the election.

On this basis, it would be touch and go. But this basis is not realistic, because not all elderly voters would move in the same direction. Some will no doubt desert Labor.

In other words, Labor is unlikely to win the election on the basis of the grey vote alone. It needs

other parts of the electorate to switch to Labor as well if it expects to be victorious.

Medicare Gold's potential as a knock-out blow against Howard has probably been exaggerated.

And so, too, was the other dominant political assumption of the week - that John Howard's $5.9 billion in net new spending over the next four years would lead to an increase in interest rates.

This claim is easily tested. There is a ready reality check called the financial markets. How did they react to Howard's announcement? "The three-year bond yield is pretty well 5.25 per cent, so on the market's assessment nothing much is going to happen to home loan rates in the next couple of years," said a Macquarie Bank economist, Rory Robertson.

The net political result for the week? According to the Morgan poll released yesterday, the Coalition's share of the vote was up 1 percentage point to 52.5 per cent and Labor was down 1 percentage point to 47.5 per cent. This shift is well within the poll's margin of error, suggesting that, for all the sound and fury, the week was a draw.

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Young and strong but could use a little grey power

By Peter Hartcher
September 30, 2004

'In the prime of my life' ... Labor leader Mark Latham waves to the audience after the official launch of his election campaign in Brisbane yesterday.
Photo: *Robert Rough*

The atmospherics of Mark Latham's Labor launch yesterday were all about his youthfulness, but his policy offerings were all about the elderly.

He danced for the young, but he sang for the old.

In a peculiar juxtaposition, he taunted John Howard about his age - then appealed for the support of the aged. Latham declared his own age - 43 - and announced that he was "in the prime of my life". He mocked Howard: "I'm ready to lead. He's ready to leave."

His fresh-faced wife took the podium and playfully chided her husband that, after his campaign absences from home, he owes his young sons 75 bedtime stories.

The young family, out for a stroll, was flashed onto an overhead screen. It was all there. And then, in the middle of it, Latham announced that Australia needed to "honour and respect" our senior citizens, and that he would spend $3.7 billion over the next four years, or a net $1.7 billion after offsetting savings, to do just that.

Unlike Howard's promises on Sunday of benefits for half-a-dozen constituencies, Latham held out the prospect of benefits for only one. And it is the only age group that has been clearly signalling that it will vote for the Coalition. Voters over 55 say they will favour the Government over the Opposition by 60 per cent to 40, on the average of the last three *Herald Polls*.

So Latham set out to plunder Howard's heartland and take some of these votes for Labor. If successful, this stroke could be decisive in a close election:

"For every 3 per cent of the older voters he can pull away from Howard, he will get an extra 1 per cent on the national vote for Labor," calculated the *Herald* pollster, AC Nielsen's John Stirton.

Will it work?

The ANU economist and poll watcher Andrew Leigh points out that Latham has chosen a hard target. Older voters have a low propensity to "swing", or to change their vote from one party to

another from one election to the next.

In a study of swing voters over 10 of the 15 elections held between 1966 and 2001, he found that, overall, 10 per cent of the electorate swings on average but that only 7 per cent of voters over 60 swing. This average of 7 per cent also applied in the last election.

So if Latham could pull half of the older swinging vote across the line - assuming that the other half could be swinging in the opposite direction - he could indeed gain an extra percentage point in Labor's primary vote. One per cent is not decisive but it is important - remember that Labor needs a uniform swing of only 2.2 per cent to win.

And the joint chief executive of the 300,000-strong COTA-National Seniors lobby, David Deans, said that "neither political party should assume that seniors are rusted on - I think they are prepared to change their votes".

But he's not sure that Labor's package will compel many to change. He was warm on Labor's proposals but concerned about the feasibility of moving the 750,000 elderly now on hospital waiting lists quickly into beds: "Do we have enough capacity in the system? Do we have enough hours of specialists' services available?"

And the odds on the election outcome offered by the betting agency Centrebet reflected this caution. After Latham's speech yesterday the flows of money did show a modest improvement in Labor's standing, but still, with odds of $1.33 on a $1 bet for the Coalition and $3 for Labor, it did not strike bettors as decisive.

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TRENDS

Women move to left

WOMEN have become more left-wing in the past 30 years, in part due to the growing divorce rate, according to a new paper on Australian elections. Compiled by Australian National University economist Andrew Leigh, the paper found income, age and country of birth were important indicators of which way a person voted. Dr Leigh, using figures gleaned from elections between 1966 and 2001, found women were increasingly likely to vote for Labor. He said that in 1966, women were 14 percentage points more likely to back the Coalition then headed by Harold Holt. But by the 2001 poll, the difference between male and female voters had disappeared.

Our women voters head steadily Left

By Danielle Cronin

The gender gap has closed in recent federal elections as Australian woman are steadily moving to the Left, according to a Canberra researcher.

Australian National University economist Dr Andrew Leigh found women were more likely to vote for the Coalition in the 1960s, but the gender divide had disappeared in recent elections.

He said that in 1966, women were 14 percentage points more likely to back the coalition then headed by Harold Holt.

But by the 2001 poll, the difference between male and female voters had disappeared.

"Australian women, like their US counterparts, have steadily become more left-wing," Dr Leigh said.

US studies suggest the closing of the gender gap reflects the decline in unionisation or the lower marriage and higher divorce rates.

Dr Leigh said women were generally left poorer after a divorce.

As poorer voters were more likely to support Labor than the Coalition, it followed that as more women found themselves divorced then they would back the ALP.

Income, age and country of birth were all important indicators of how people voted.

Dr Leigh scrutinised post-election surveys of 14,000 voters from 1966 to 2001 covering 10 federal polls.

In an unsurprising finding, the richer, older voters were more likely to support the Coalition and poorer, foreign-born and younger electors were more likely to vote for Labor.

The rich-poor and old-young partisan divide appeared to have widened over time, he said.

In 2001, voters aged 50 to 59 years were 18 per cent more likely to vote for the Coalition than electors aged 18 to 29 years.

And voters older than 60 years were 25 per cent more likely to support the Coalition in 2001 — the partisan age gap had more than doubled since 1966.

Foreign-born voters are 15 per cent more likely to vote for Labor than Australian-born electors today but there was little difference in their voting patterns in the 1960s.

All-important swing voters — the 10 per cent of Australians who changed their primary vote from one election to the next — were usually younger, male and overseas-born.