

# Reclaiming Progressive Australia

Demographic Change and Progressive Political Strategy  
in Australia

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The “Demographic Change and Progressive Political Strategy” series of papers is a joint project organized under the auspices of the Global Progress and Progressive Studies programs and the Center for American Progress. The research project was launched following the inaugural Global Progress conference held in October 2009 in Madrid, Spain.

The preparatory paper for that conference, “[The European Paradox](#),” sought to analyze why the fortunes of European progressive parties had declined following the previous autumn’s sudden financial collapse and the global economic recession that ensued. The starting premise was that progressives should, in principle, have had two strengths going for them:

- Modernizing trends were shifting the demographic terrain in their political favor.
- The intellectual and policy bankruptcy of conservatism, which had now proven itself devoid of creative ideas of how to shape the global economic system for the common good.

Despite these latent advantages, we surmised that progressives in Europe were struggling for three primary reasons. First, it was increasingly hard to differentiate themselves from conservative opponents who seemed to be wholeheartedly adopting social democratic policies and language in response to the economic crisis. Second, the nominally progressive majority within their electorate was being split between competing progressive movements. Third, their traditional working-class base was increasingly being seduced by a politics of identity rather than economic arguments.

In response, we argued that if progressives could define their long-term economic agenda more clearly—and thus differentiate themselves from conservatives—as well as establish broader and more inclusive electoral coalitions, and organize more effectively among their core constituencies to convey their message, then they should be able to resolve this paradox.

The research papers in this series each evaluate these demographic and ideological trends in greater national detail and present ideas for how progressives might shape a more effective political strategy.

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# Introduction

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## Labor in government, 1983 to 1996 and 2007 to 2010

By 1990, the Australian Labor Party had been in office for seven years, having returned to office in 1983 under the leadership of Bob Hawke. At the 1990 federal election, Bob Hawke led Labor to a historic fourth victory over the conservative Liberal-National Coalition, winning 78 of the 148 seats in the House of Representatives. Labor's victory came despite a low primary vote (39.44 percent) and despite losing the national two-party preferred vote 49.9 percent to 50.1 percent. (In the Australian system, the primary vote is a voter's first choice among all parties; the two-party preferred vote is, in essence, which of the two main parties—the Labor Party or National Coalition—the voter prefers).

The 1990 election marked the high point for the centrist Australian Democrats party, which captured 11.26 percent of the primary vote. The Australian Democrats narrowly failed to win a seat in the House of Representatives but their vote was enough to take their representation to eight seats in the Senate.

In 1991, Bob Hawke was challenged for the Labor leadership (and prime ministership) by Paul Keating, who had been treasurer since Labor had regained office in 1983. Paul Keating would go on to win the 1993 election against Liberal leader John Hewson, who had proposed a radical neoliberal platform, “Fightback,” based on deregulation of the labor market and the introduction of a goods and services tax. At that election, Labor's primary vote rebounded to 44.92 percent and the party won 51.44 percent of the two-party preferred vote.

This would be the last federal election won by Labor for 11 years. In 1996, Labor was sent into opposition. The Liberal-National Coalition led by John Howard won 94 of the 148 seats in the House of Representatives. At the next election, under the leadership of Kim Beazley, Labor's vote and support rebounded strongly, in another election fought on a Liberal promise to introduce a goods and services tax. Despite winning the two-party preferred vote, Labor did not win a majority

of seats and remained in opposition. In the shadow of divisive debates about terrorism and asylum seekers, Labor and Kim Beazley lost the 2001 election. Three years later, Labor lost the 2004 election under the leadership of Mark Latham.

In 2007, the Australian Labor Party's opposition leader Kevin Rudd ran a strong and optimistic campaign against an 11-year conservative incumbent. Rudd's was an ambitious platform of investment in services; responsible economic management; and social change, including promises of massive education and health care reform, repeal of the so-called "WorkChoices" laws, which entrenched labor market flexibility, and the promise to tackle climate change, which he described as "the great moral challenge of our generation."<sup>1</sup> The result was a strong swing to Labor and a moderate majority for the government. More importantly, it arrived with significant political momentum behind it.

The government immediately set to work implementing its agenda with an ambitious 100-day plan that commenced with the ratification of the Kyoto Agreement on December 3, 2007, and through a long-anticipated and welcomed apology to the nation's indigenous stolen generation. Combat troops were pulled out of Iraq, in line with Labor's election commitment to end this engagement.

Through these early achievements the government maintained high credibility and popularity; however, some criticism began to emerge from news commentators and other sections of the conservative establishment promoting the argument that the Rudd government was more focused on reviews than on delivering solid outcomes. This followed a number of significant reviews being commissioned in key policy areas, including on taxation reform and into a model for an Emissions Trading Scheme for the nation. Conservative commentators built their case on government inaction with a combination of rising cost of living prices and by criticizing a major summit called Australia 2020.

Held in April 2008 to "help shape a long term strategy for the nation's future," this summit aimed to include a population that felt isolated from their government. Chaired by Prime Minister Rudd and Vice Chancellor Glyn Davis of the University of Melbourne, the Australia 2020 Summit brought together 100 key nongovernment participants to Parliament House to discuss and put forward proposals for improving 10 key areas of Australian society.<sup>2</sup> All Australians were invited to send in proposals for consideration. The government would then respond to the resulting proposals for the long-term benefit of Australia and its citizens. The scale of the proposals put forward from the summit were seen by some in the community

as unrealistic and unworkable. This helped to cement a view among some that the government lacked a clear reform direction and agenda. This critique would be mounted against the government as later political events unfolded.

The government was able to answer some of its critics through the defining political event of the period: the global financial crisis. In late 2008 the global financial crisis reached its crisis point with the collapse of several major U.S. financial institutions in September and October, and the consequences began to reverberate in Australia. The Rudd response was rapid and effective—in February 2009 a \$A42 billion (about the same in U.S. dollars) stimulus package was passed by Parliament. This package channelled budget surplus funds into several national building exercises, including \$A14.7 billion for the “Building the Education Revolution,” or BER program and \$A3.7 billion for a plan to install insulation in homes.

The stimulus package kept Australia out of recession—one of only “a handful of developed countries that are likely to sail through the global downturn with only a small dip in growth.”<sup>3</sup> Emerging from the successful response to the global crisis were predictable and unfounded conservative attacks on “debt, waste and mismanagement.” These attacks were without basis, with most of the stimulus projects successfully delivered and delivered at a reasonable price for taxpayers. The dominance of fiscally conservative thinking and commentary in the public media did, however, create a climate where stimulus programs were attacked, leading to a difficult political environment for the government as the Copenhagen Climate Summit neared.

A well-organized and aggressive conservative media focussed heavily on the difficulties within the stimulus programs. These programs needed to be enacted quickly to stimulate the economy, and a bureaucracy that had over the previous 10 years of neoliberal government been stripped of implementation capacities often struggled with the workload. Inevitably, a small number of projects became the focus of an intense media campaign. Stories of overpriced buildings and communities marginalized from the decision-making process fed into the inaccurate but politically driven narrative that the Rudd government was wasteful, nonconsultative, and adding to the national debt.

Despite these difficulties, the government remained in an ascendant position and pushed forward with its agenda towards the end of 2009. This included negotiations with the opposition to pass legislation for an Emissions Trading Scheme. The process leading up to the defeat of this legislation dramatically split the conservative opposition, and a leadership challenge saw the defeat by one vote of

climate change believer opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull by climate change skeptic Tony Abbott. With no prospect of legislation passing on any of his legislative climate change proposals, Prime Minister Rudd attended the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit in December 2009. When the Copenhagen talks collapsed, Rudd returned to Australia to face a very hostile environment from the opposition and the media, and, for the first time, he faced confusion from within his own party and support base.

During the first two years of his government, Rudd had enjoyed unprecedented high opinion polls. But from December 2009 to March 2010, his satisfaction rating dropped a dramatic 10 points.

During this time, Rudd became heavily focused on a massive Australia-wide series of consultations and discussions on health reform. But he was increasingly unable to cut through the focus on steadily declining poll numbers and an agenda increasingly owned by a reinvigorated opposition that kept attention firmly on their campaign to label the government as poor economic managers.

Unable to grab any poll traction, in April 2010 the government announced it would defer its planned Emissions Trading Scheme until at least 2013. Following the decision, a key group of voters who had swung to the ALP in 2007 now looked to other political parties.

This decision also occurred against a backdrop of continuing boat arrivals of asylum seekers from Australia's north. This was, as it has been for a decade or more, a contentious issue for the ALP. No issue so divides Labor's dual bases of progressive Australians and outer-suburban working families than this issue. Throughout Rudd's term, there had been a worldwide steady increase in the numbers of asylum seekers, with increased numbers crossing by boat into Australia. The opposition maintained an increasingly hard line—former Prime Minister Howard famously said on the eve of his winning 2001 election campaign, “we will decide who comes into this country and the circumstances in which they come,” and this remained the fundamental core of the opposition policy.

Playing into a deep Australian fear of illegal immigration, this issue has been consistently used as a “wedge” issue against Labor, working to split the vote of lower-income voters—the “working families” that carried Rudd over the line in 2007.

In the lead-up to the 2010 May federal budget, Rudd sought to gain ground and maintain his economic credentials by announcing a Resource Super Profits Tax, or RSPT, a 40 percent profit-based tax on the mining resources sector, as the initial start of a 10-year tax reform process. In response, the mining industry threw millions of dollars at a series of anti-RSPT ads. The anti-RSPT campaign was joined by the Western Australian State Government, by the federal opposition, and by the multimillion-dollar mining community itself. The mining tax became the death knell for an increasingly frustrated caucus.

On June 22, 2010, *The Australian* published a Newspoll taken in marginal seats—the same seats that carried Rudd to victory in 2007. The poll showed clearly the depth of Rudd’s woes. On two-party preferred, Labor showed a 6 percent swing against them in three marginal Queensland seats, and a primary vote dropping below 30 percent in some seats. As an indicator of the mood of the electorate, this was a damning swing for a prime minister from Queensland.

On June 24, 2010, Kevin Rudd resigned as prime minister and did not stand for the prime ministership at the Caucus meeting that morning. Julia Gillard was elected Labor leader and prime minister unopposed.

Prime Minister Gillard’s first action was to neutralize the crippling debate surrounding the Resource Super Profits Tax. She immediately canceled all government advertising and offered to renegotiate with the mining companies. The new tax was announced on July 2, 2010, and was indeed a compromise solution that neutralized the issue.

In an environment of intense media speculation as to the date of the next federal election, and as polls showed a slight improvement in the primary vote since taking office, Gillard announced on July 17, 2010, that a federal election would be held on August 21, 2010.

In what is now often referred to as one of the most difficult campaigns in Australian history, Gillard entered the campaign having neutralized the volatile issues of the mining tax and on a slight bounce associated with a new leader. Although hamstrung with not being able to campaign on the economic success of the previous term, the main campaign platform would be the introduction of the National Broadband Network, a \$A43 billion plan to provide a nationwide fiber-access network to improve broadband capabilities. Tied in with further detail on the health reform package started by Rudd, this was to be a quiet, safe campaign that would reinforce a new prime minister’s credentials.



During week two of the campaign, cabinet leaks were in every major Australian media outlet. With these the election campaign became focused once again on the internal factional disunity of the ALP following the leadership change.

As the campaign progressed, the opposition played out a small target campaign, aware of the weakness of Tony Abbott as an alternative prime minister. By half-way through the campaign, it was clear that the support that had bled from the ALP to the Greens was not returning. The Coalition remained steady and in a strong position.

On election day (August 21, 2010), neither major party emerged with a clear win in terms of seats. Labor had won the popular vote, though, and was able to claim a mandate. The Green Party won a seat in the House of Representatives, one that had previously been held by the ALP since 1904. Both leaders of the major parties gave brief election night speeches but it was obvious that it would take some time before the final result was known.

In fact, it took 17 days. During this time, the ALP secured the popular vote and made an agreement with the Green Party to provide support (the Green Party would hold control of the Senate from July 1, 2011). Both the ALP and the Coalition won 72 of the 150 seats each, but with the Green Party and three Independents, the ALP formed the first federal minority government since 1940, with a very slim two-seat majority over the Coalition.

While the election result and the subsequent minority government was an extraordinary result, the two major parties in Australian federal politics rarely have a large gap between their final vote counts. The 2010 election, however, saw some traditional Labor voting blocs transfer their votes not to the Liberal-National Coalition but to the Green Party. The combination of this disillusioned vote with the diminishing numbers of the traditional Labor base (such as union membership levels) led for the first time to a result that drained numbers from the left flank of the party, even as the party was suffering losses to the Liberal-National Coalition from populist right-wing attacks on the government.

For the Australian Labor Party, the greatest challenge lies in recapturing and reinvigorating a disillusioned base of working families and progressive voters through rearticulating a clear and progressive reform agenda. This is something the Gillard Labor government is pursuing with determination through its legislative and political agenda.

# Shifting coalitions

## A declining base

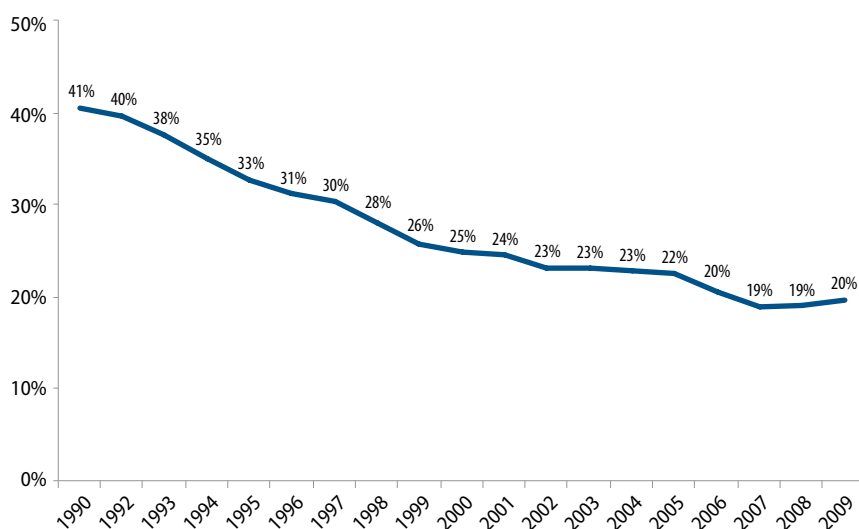
The Australian Labor Party was established in the late 19th century by the labor movement, and trade union members remain one of the party's most reliable voting blocs. The worst federal election defeat for the ALP in the last 20 years occurred in 1996 when John Howard defeated Paul Keating. The two-party preferred vote for Labor at that election was just 46.37 percent. According to the Australian Election Study, union members were one of only two demographic groups (the other being voters with no religion) to give Labor a majority of the two-party preferred vote in 1996. Six in 10 (60 percent) union members supported Labor above the Coalition.

While union members have remained staunch Labor voters, their numbers have diminished over time. Since 1990, the unionized proportion of the Australian workforce has more than halved. Currently, only around one in five Australian workers belongs to a trade union. This decline in the traditional core of the Labor Party has made the task of building a broader progressive coalition an essential and urgent one (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1**

### Union membership is declining in Australia

Proportion of the Australian workforce belonging to a trade union, 1990-2009



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Women

Historically, there has been a gender gap in Australian politics, with men more likely to support the ALP than women. Whereas the trade union movement was able to marshal support among men, especially in manual occupations for the ALP, women were more removed from the structures and priorities of the party.

Much has changed since the early days of the party. The ALP developed a long list of achievements for women, including equal pay for equal work, removal of sex discrimination, support for child care, and most recently the introduction of paid parental leave. The ALP also led the way in the representation of women. To date there have been female premiers in Western Australia (Carmen Lawrence, 1992), Victoria (Joan Kirner, 1992), Queensland (Anna Bligh, 2007-), New South Wales (Kristina Kenneally, 2009-2010), and Tasmania (Lara Giddings, 2010-). There have been female chief ministers in Australia’s two mainland territories—the Northern Territory (Clare Martin, 2001-2007) and the ACT (Rosemary Follett, 1989, 1991-1995). All of them have come from the ALP. In 2007, Julia Gillard became Australia’s first female deputy prime minister.

Nonetheless, over most of the last 20 years, a gender gap has persisted. The gender gap was prominent in the 1993 election, when according to the Australian Election Study, a majority of men cast their primary vote for the ALP while women voters narrowly preferred John Hewson and the Liberal-National Coalition over Paul Keating and the ALP (see Table 1).

The 2007 election was the first time a positive gender gap emerged. Available evidence is that this gender gap increased at the 2010 election. Julia Gillard assumed

TABLE 1  
Only recently have women voted more for Labor than men

ALP primary vote by gender, 1990-2007

	1990	1993	1996	1998	2004	2007
Male	42	50	39	42	40	45
Female	40	44	34	40	38	46
Total	41	47	36	41	39	45
Gender gap	-2	-6	-5	-2	-2	1

Source: Australian Election Study.

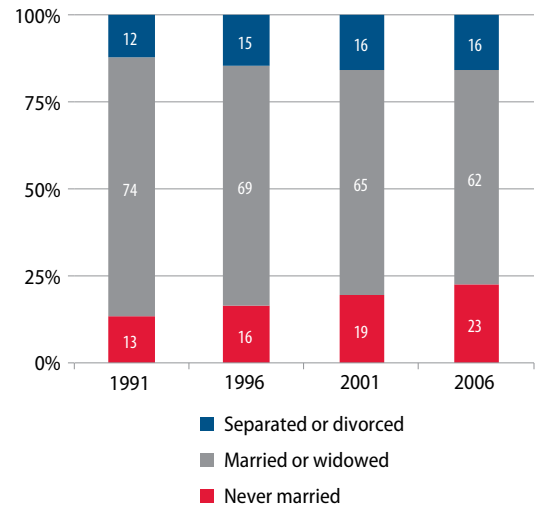
the leadership of the Labor Party and the prime ministership in June. The leader of the opposition, Tony Abbott, had a long history of making comments widely condemned as offensive to women. According to the last Newspoll published before the election, Julia Gillard had a 46-36 satisfied-dissatisfied rating among female voters. Tony Abbott's satisfaction-dissatisfaction spread among female voters was 38 percent to 51 percent. Unlike in 1993, it was likely the female vote that proved decisive and Labor was able to continue in office.

Changing social patterns provide some explanation for the slowly improving Labor support among female voters. As social patterns have changed over time, marriage has become less frequent. The following figure uses census data from 1991 to 2006 and shows that the number of females aged 25 to 59 who are married has declined sharply over time, while the number of females who have never married (including those in de facto relationships) as well as those who are separated or divorced have increased (see Figure 2).

Marital status has proved to be a better indicator of Labor support among women than labor force participation. It has generally been assumed that Labor does comparatively well among women working full time and less well among women working part time and women who are not in the labor force. But this measure presents a confusing picture since students—a group that tends to strongly prefer Labor to the conservative Liberal-National coalition—may be working part time or not at all. Over the last 20 years, Labor enjoyed stronger support from women who are single and from those who are separated or divorced but has done less well among women who are married or in a de facto relationship (see Table 2).

These trends offer some hope for Labor that the gender gap will persist in future elections. The difference in support for the ALP between single women and women who are married or in de facto relationships reflects a combination of cultural and lifecycle factors. Being married tends to coincide with purchasing a home and having children of school-going age—policy areas where Labor has been subjected to considerable attacks from its opponents in recent elections. If it were just for these lifestyle factors, the difference in support might not account for much, since women would be assumed to move through different lifecycles. A number of demographic trends, however, are evident.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Single women are increasing in Australia**  
Marital status of females aged 25-59, 1991-2006



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census data.

**TABLE 2**  
**The Labor party does better among single women voters**  
 ALP primary support among women voters aged under 60, by marital status, 1990-2007

	1990	1993	1996	1998	2004	2007
Never married	44	52	37	52	42	49
Married/de facto	37	42	33	37	38	43
Separated/divorced	52	55	34	34	36	63
Total	40	45	35	39	39	46
Gap between never married and married/de facto	8	10	4	15	4	6

\*Total includes widowed (not shown).  
 Source: Australian Election Study.

First, women are entering into relationships later in life, meaning that the never-married phase is being extended. Second, women today are much more likely to be separated or divorced than they were 30 years ago, so this group of women is also more important. It is also worth noting that other research has shown that people who are married are less likely to vote for Labor or other left-of-center parties than those who are in de facto relationships. This could mean a shift toward Labor over time as well, as more couples choose not to get married.

### Ethnic background

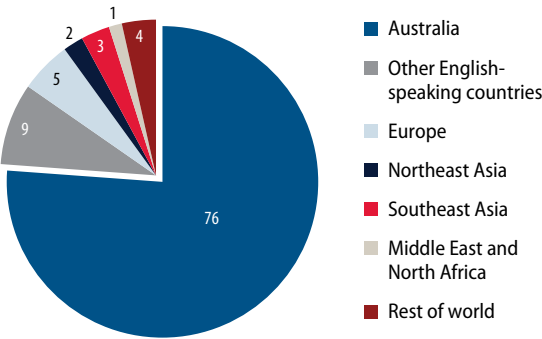
Australia is a nation built on immigration. Yet there is no single identifiable “migrant” voting bloc. Over time, the origin of Australia’s immigrants has shifted. Before World War II, immigration to Australia was predominantly from other English-speaking countries (primarily the United Kingdom and Ireland). After World War II, immigrants from the United Kingdom were joined by displaced Europeans, particularly from Italy and Greece.

In the 1970s and 1980s, large numbers of refugees from Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries were welcomed to Australia. More recently, growing numbers of immigrants have been arriving from China and other Northeast Asian countries. From the Middle East, immigrants from Lebanon and Turkey first began arriving in Australia prior to World War II. More recently, larger numbers of immigrants have arrived from Iraq, Syria, and North Africa. In the last decade, however, there has also been a resurgence in the number of immigrants from the United Kingdom (see Figure 3).

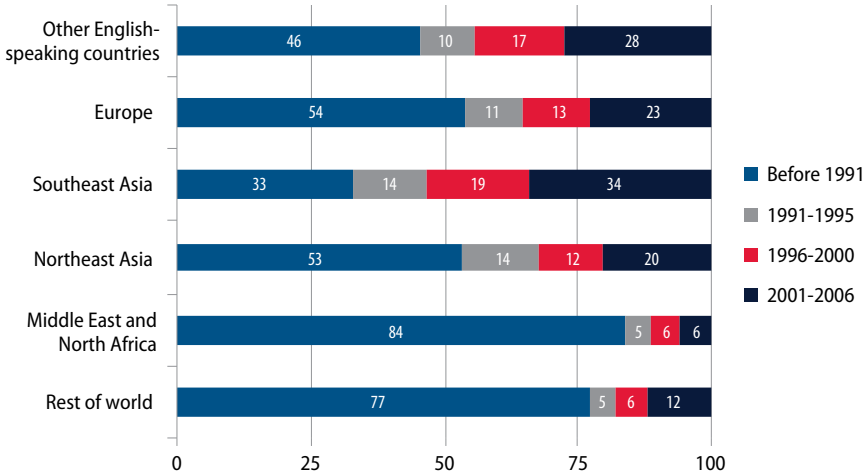
Generally speaking, the Labor Party has enjoyed strong support from voters born outside Australia. Labor has historically done far better with new and established migrant communities, with the party’s more open approach to multiculturalism and immigration often serving it well when new electors cast their votes. The level of support for the Labor Party is even higher when only those born in non-English-speaking countries are considered (see Table 3).

Sample-size limitations mean it is impossible to present results for each election by ethnicity, but as a guide only we present the ALP primary vote for the 1990-2007 elections (excluding the 2001 election, for which there are no data). To further increase the number of respondents, we include respondents whose parent(s) were born

**FIGURE 3**  
**About a quarter of Australia’s population was born outside the country**  
 Immigrants to the country by region of birth



**Immigrants to the country by region of birth and time of arrival**



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census data, 2006.

**TABLE 3**  
**Labor does better among those born outside Australia**

ALP primary vote by country of birth, 1990-2007

	1990	1993	1996	1998	2004	2007
Born in Australia	39	46	35	38	36	43
Born outside Australia	49	50	41	48	46	52
Born in a non-English-speaking country	53	57	46	45	51	60
Total	41	47	36	38	39	45

Source: Australian Election Study.

**TABLE 4**  
**Labor does particularly well among voters of Southeast Asian origin**

ALP primary vote, elections 1990-2007, by ethnic background\*

Background	ALP primary
Born in Australia, both parents born in Australia	39
Another English-speaking country	40
Europe	49
Southeast Asia	59
Middle East	53

\*Does not include the 2001 election.  
Source: Australian Election Study.

outside Australia. What is clear is that support is high among voters from Southeast Asian backgrounds and Middle Eastern backgrounds—two large and growing demographics (see Table 4).

There are not currently enough AES data on the voting patterns of immigrants from Northeast Asia. But other research suggests that support for the ALP is lower in this group and this group swings more between elections.

The strongest swings to the ALP in 2007 were in areas with little ethnic diversity. In contrast, heavily multicultural areas swung against the ALP by double digits in 2010. This means ethnic areas have been a relative weak spot for two elections in a row, failing to swing strongly last time and then swinging heavily against the ALP this time. More data are needed, though, to determine if this is because of an underlying shift of support among migrants or nonmigrants or both in these areas.

Age

A familiar age pattern is evident in Australian voting. Older voters are more likely to support the Liberal-National Coalition than the Labor Party. As observed in many other countries, younger voters are more likely to support parties of the left (Labor Party, Greens) than parties of the right (Liberal-National Party Coalition). Australia is one of the few developed democracies with compulsory voting, so this high level of support is not offset to any noticeable degree by lower turnout among young voters.

**TABLE 5**  
**Younger voters are more likely to support Labor or the Greens**

Primary vote by age, 2007 and 2010

	2007			2010		
	18-34	35-49	50+	18-34	35-49	50+
Labor	49	45	41	35	42	37
Coalition	36	41	48	38	38	48
Greens	8	7	5	19	15	9
Others	7	7	6	8	5	6

Source: Newspoll.

Yet young people are increasingly giving their primary to the Greens while still preferring the ALP to the Coalition. According to the last Newspoll published before the 2010 election, nearly one in five voters under the age of 35 were intending to vote first for the Greens. This represents a significant erosion of support for Labor, which secured 49 percent of first preference votes from voters under 35 in 2007 (see Table 5).

A familiar question is to what extent are variations in levels of support between older and younger voters generational rather than based on lifecycle factors. Using data from the Australian Election Study, we can examine how generational votes change over time. We divide voters into five generations. Those born in 1919 or earlier we call the World War I generation. By the time of the 1990 election, its youngest members were already 70. By 1996, there were too few respondents to track.

The Depression generation is those born between 1920 and 1944. In the 1990 election, most would have been preparing to leave the workforce or already retired. By the time of the 2007 election, the youngest Depression generation voters would have been 63 and nearly all would have retired. The youngest baby boomers were in their mid 20s at the time of the 1990 election. By the time of the 2007 election, they were middle aged. Generation X first voted in large numbers at the 1993 election, a period of high youth unemployment. By the time of the 2007 election, the youngest Generation X voter was 28. By 2004, Millennial generation voters were also participating in elections.

What is interesting from the first table is that the World War I generation, the oldest cohort, actually appears to be very slightly more supportive of Labor than the Depression generation. The baby boomers also appear to be more supportive of



Labor, relatively speaking, than the Depression generation was at approximately the same age. In 1990 the proportion of the Depression generation voting for Labor as their first preference was 4 percent lower than for all voters. In 2007 support among the baby boomers for Labor was on par with support from all voters—both around 45 percent (see Tables 6 and 7).

In comparison, Generation X voters in 2007 had a similar level of primary support for the ALP (0.4 percentage points more than all voters) as did baby boomers in 1990 (1.8 points more than all voters). But as most of the lost primary vote from Generation X voters has gone to the Greens rather than the Coalition, there has been much less impact on the two-party preferred figure.

**TABLE 6**  
**The Depression generation has the lowest primary support for Labor**

ALP primary vote by generation, 1990-2007

	1990	1993	1996	1998	2004	2007
World War I generation	42	43	NA	NA	NA	NA
Depression generation	37	44	31	35	35	43
Baby boomers	43	51	39	39	42	46
Generation X	NA	52	36	49	39	46
Millennial generation	NA	NA	NA	NA	36	50
Total	41	47	36	41	39	45

Source: Australian Election Study.

**TABLE 7**  
**Generation X and the Millennial generation have the highest two-party preferred vote for Labor**

ALP two-party preferred vote by generation, 1990-2007

	1996	1998	2004	2007
World War I generation	.	.	NA	NA
Depression generation	.	.	34	42
Baby boomers	.	.	45	49
Generation X	.	.	47	60
Millennial generation	.	.	NA	NA
Total	.	.	42	49

Source: Australian Election Study.

It has been argued that at the 2010 election the ALP lost much of the increase in support from baby boomers that it had gained at the 2007 election because the global financial crisis had destroyed much of their superannuation (retirement) savings.<sup>4</sup> Published Newspoll data do not provide sufficient detail so we will have to wait for AES data to test that claim.

## Religion

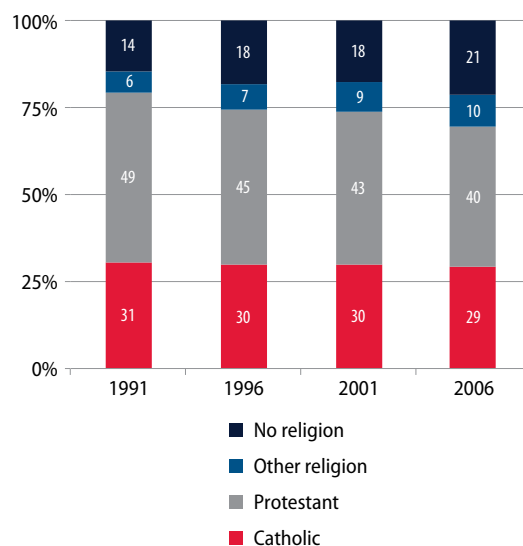
In line with the changing ethnic composition in Australia, and a general secularization, the proportion of the population belonging to Christian religions is declining. Most of the decline is in Protestant religions while the proportion of Catholics is declining much more slowly.

The number of Australians belonging to non-Christian religions is increasing but the overall proportions remain very low: Fewer than 1 in 15 Australians identified with a non-Christian religion in 2006. The fastest growing religious group is those professing no religion. Between 1991 and 2006, the proportion of Australians with no religion increased by half, rising from 14 percent of the population to 21 percent (see Figure 4).

The changes in religion over time have a clear impact on voting patterns. On the primary vote, Labor does better on average among Catholic voters, voters from Orthodox and non-Christian religions, and among voters with no religion. Labor has consistently done poorly among Protestant voters. While evangelical religions may be growing, this is largely at the expense of established Protestant religions, so this is unlikely to mean much further erosion of Labor support. A positive trend for Labor and other progressive parties is the growth of other religions and voters with no religion. In the case of voters with no religion in particular, nearly a quarter will give their primary vote to the Greens before preferencing Labor ahead of the Coalition (see Table 8).

**FIGURE 4**  
**The proportion of those with no religion is growing in Australia**

Religious affiliation of Australians, 1991-2006



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census data.

TABLE 8

**Those with no religion strongly support Labor**

Primary and two-party preferred vote for Labor, by religion, 1990-2007

Primary	1990	1993	1996	1998	2004	2007
Catholic	48	57	40	46	41	48
Protestant	38	41	29	34	32	40
Other	37	44	40	46	43	48
No religion	45	53	46	45	44	50
Total	41	47	36	41	39	45
<b>Two-party preferred</b>						
Catholic			45	54	47	55
Protestant			34	41	37	46
Other			48	55	51	57
No religion			56	59	62	65
Total			42	50	47	54

Source: Australian Election Study.

Looking at frequency of religious attendance, it can be clearly seen that Labor only does poorly among the very observant—those attending religious services at least once a week. Indeed, Labor primary support among those who attend at least once a month is usually higher than among those who never attend. This is further evidence that Labor is not greatly threatened by any increase in religious activity (see Table 9).

TABLE 9

**The most observant are least supportive of Labor**

Primary vote for Labor, by frequency of religious attendance, 1990-2007

	1990	1993	1996	1998	2004	2007
At least once a week	32	40	30	34	33	38
At least once a month	38	44	32	44	42	47
At least once a year	40	43	36	36	36	47
Less than once a year	41	47	35	43	40	46
Never	48	53	42	43	40	47

Source: Australian Election Study.

## Occupation

The Australian Labor Party was founded as a workers' party, with strong ties to the trade union movement and very high levels of support among men working in manual occupations in traditional industries. The workforce in Australia has undergone tremendous change over the last 20 years. Skilled and semiskilled jobs in traditional industries have been declining as a share of total employment. Professional jobs, and to a lesser extent managerial jobs, have been growing. The largest category of employment continues to be service-sector jobs, in clerical, sales, and community- and personal-service occupations (see Figure 5).

Labor continues to do well among technical and trades workers and among other blue-collar workers (machinery operators, drivers, and laborers). Over the last 20 years, Labor support among professional workers has grown. But as the gap between the primary vote figure and the two-party preferred figure shows, Labor must increasingly compete with the Greens for professional workers' first preference. Labor does very poorly among managerial workers.

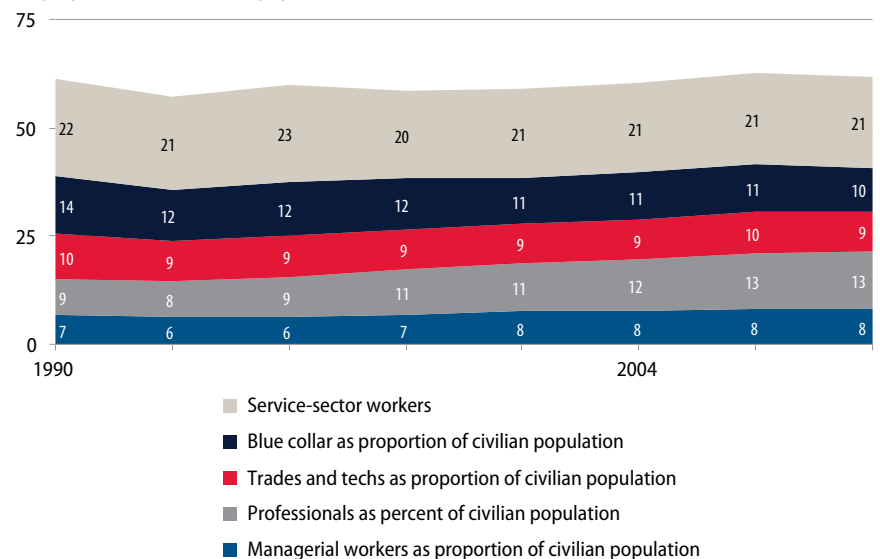
Although they are growing as a proportion of the workforce, so too is Labor's share of the managerial vote. While it is unsurprising that Labor does poorly among managerial workers, there is probably room for improvement among service-sector workers. Many service-sector workers are women working part time and looking to balance work and family responsibilities. If Labor, through its progressive policies relating to child care, paid parental leave, and early child education, can draw this segment of workers into a progressive coalition, its position will be even stronger (see Table 10).

FIGURE 5

### Blue-collar workers are declining and professionals are increasing in Australia

Occupational categories as a proportion of the civilian population aged 15 and older

As proportion of the civilian population



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Quarterly Labour Force data, period matched to each election 1990-2010.

**TABLE 10**  
**Labor does best among blue collar workers**

Primary and two-party preferred vote for Labor, by occupation, 1990-2007

	1990	1993	1996	1998	2004	2007
<b>ALP primary vote</b>						
Manager	24	28	23	26	27	28
Professional	36	42	39	34	39	43
Trades or technician	39	54	38	46	44	53
Blue collar	50	60	38	49	49	59
Service worker	44	50	37	41	36	47
<b>ALP two-party preferred vote</b>						
Manager			26	29	31	33
Professional			47	46	52	58
Trades or technician			44	60	54	59
Blue collar			45	58	51	67
Service worker			42	47	44	55

Source: Australian Election Study.

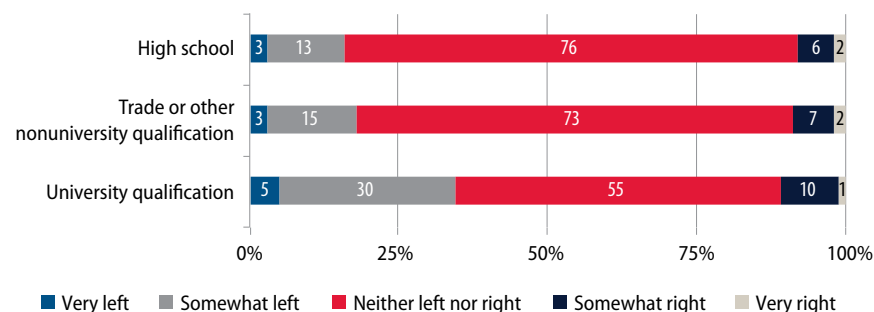
Labor's support among professional workers and blue-collar workers draws on different motivations. Higher-income and higher-education professionals who hold progressive views are inclined to support Labor or other left-wing parties on an ideological basis. Blue-collar workers and low-income earners may not have the same firm ideological views but nonetheless express strong support for Labor because they believe Labor is the best party to protect their living standards.

This is best demonstrated by the following charts from the Chifley Research Centre's "Progressive Australia Survey" (see Figures 6, 7, and 8).

**FIGURE 6**  
**The most educated are the most ideological**

Ideological position by education level

Question: In politics, people talk about the 'left' and the 'right'. Would you describe yourself as....?



Source: Chifley Research Centre, "Progressive Australia Survey" (2010).

## Geography

Government in Australia goes to the party that can command a majority in the House of Representatives. As of 2010, there are 150 seats in the House of Representatives. Following the 2010 federal election, Labor holds 72 seats. The Australian Greens won a seat in the House of Representatives for the first time. The Coalition, comprising the Liberal Party of Australia and the National Party of Australia, won 73 seats. A National Party member sitting outside the Coalition also won a seat. In addition, four independents won seats. Following intense negotiations, Labor was able to secure the support of the Australian Greens MP and three of the four independents, enabling it to continue in office.

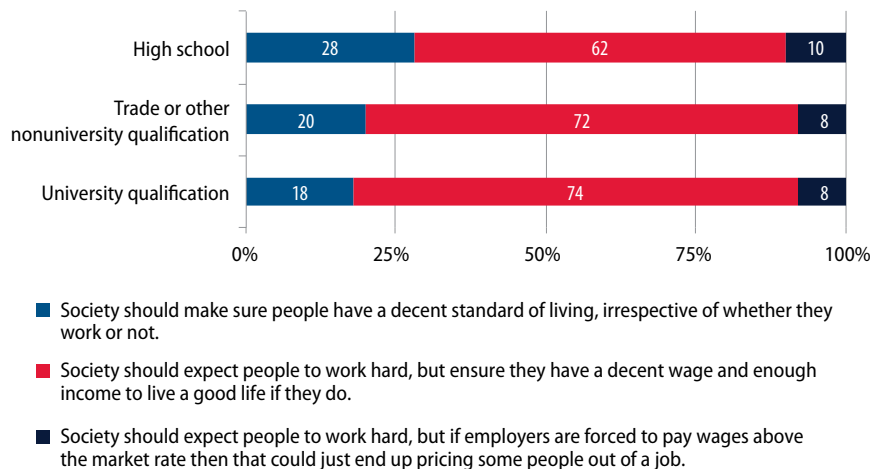
Australia is a federation comprising six states and two territories. The electorates are divided among the states and territories on the basis of population, with the proviso that no state may have fewer than five seats. Over the last 20 years, population growth has seen the number of seats held by the “sun-belt” resource-rich states of

FIGURE 7

### Those with less education are more likely to support a decent standard of living for all

#### Views on society's role in standard of living by education level

Question: Which of the following is closest to your view about society's expectations of people?



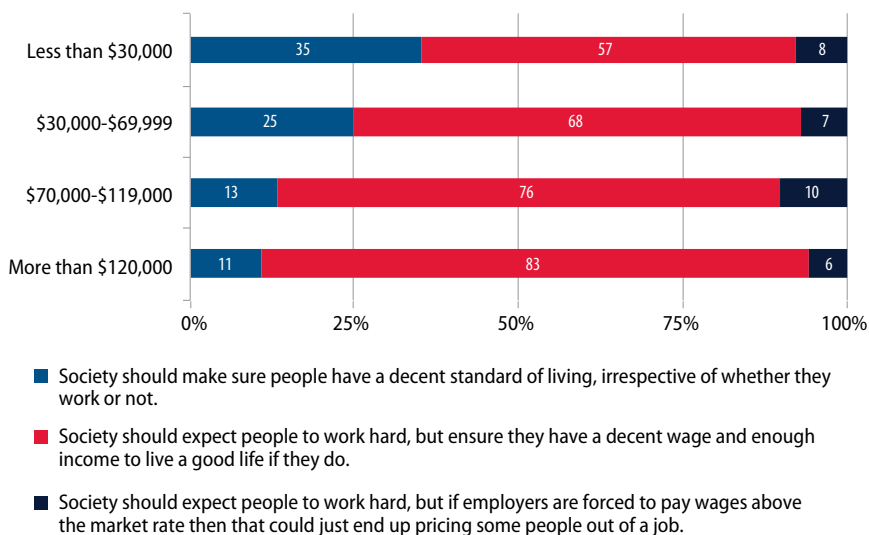
Source: Chifley Research Centre, "Progressive Australia Survey" (2010).

FIGURE 8

### Those with less income are more likely to support a decent standard of living for all

#### Views on society's role in standard of living by income level

Question: Which of the following is closest to your view about society's expectations of people?



Source: Chifley Research Centre, "Progressive Australia Survey" (2010).

Queensland and Western Australia grow at the expense of the more established states in the southeast (South Australia, Victoria, and New South Wales). An additional seat has been added to Queensland at the 1996, 1998, 2004, 2007, and 2010 elections. Western Australia added one additional seat in that time.

At the 1990 federal election, voters in Victoria and South Australia punished the Labor Party for the collapse of state financial assets that had occurred under state Labor governments. Since then, support for Labor in these states has grown, and together with Tasmania, these states have regularly given a majority of the two-party preferred vote and a majority of House of Representatives seats to Labor. Support in New South Wales, the largest state, was slower to increase but Labor won the two-party preferred vote and the majority of the seats in 2007 and 2010. Although Labor had done quite well in Western Australia in 1990 and 1993, in 2007 Labor did not win a majority of votes or seats there despite winning the election overall. In Queensland, Labor won a majority of the two-party preferred vote and a majority of seats in 2007, under the leadership of Queenslander Kevin Rudd, but did much more poorly in the 2010 election, losing six seats. In the short term, Labor's very strong performance in the southern states assists its efforts to win federal elections, but unless Federal Labor's relatively poor performance in Queensland and Western Australia improves, it will become increasingly hard to win a majority of seats overall (see Figure 9).

The Australian Electoral Commission classifies seats into four geographic categories: inner metropolitan, outer metropolitan, provincial, and rural:

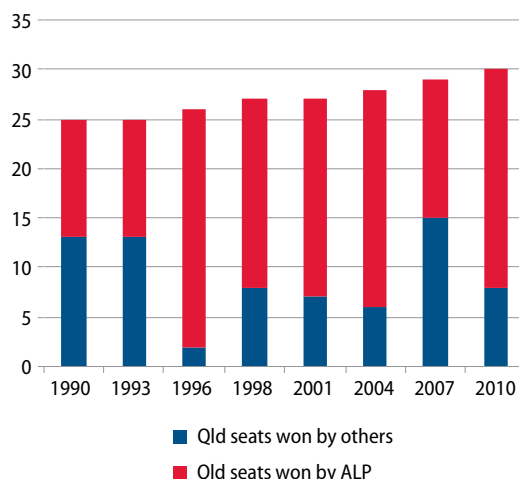
- Inner metropolitan—located in a capital city and comprising well-established, built-up suburbs
- Outer metropolitan—located in capital cities and containing areas of more recent urban expansion
- Provincial—divisions with a majority of enrollment in major provincial cities
- Rural—divisions without a majority of enrollment in major provincial cities

At federal elections, Labor tends to perform very well in inner metropolitan seats and very poorly in rural seats. This changes little between elections that Labor wins and elections that it loses. Outer metropolitan seats, in the less-

FIGURE 9

### Labor has fared poorly in the fast-growing Queensland state

Number of House of Representatives seats in Queensland won by Labor and others, 1990-2010



Source: Australian Electoral Commission.

established suburbs, are the largest category and are where elections are usually won or lost. Labor will also tend to win a majority of the provincial seats when it wins an election overall.

Despite the decline in the proportion of the population living outside the metropolitan areas, the AEC has maintained the balance between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan seats over the last 20 years. This is due partly to the constitutional constraints requiring each state and territory to have a certain number of seats, and partly due to the process used by the Electoral Commission to draw electoral boundaries. This involves gradually drawing high-growth suburban areas into low-growth rural or provincial seats to maintain balance between seats. It is therefore unlikely that Labor will noticeably benefit from the increase in voters living in metropolitan areas.

In its inner metropolitan areas of strength, Labor faces a growing competition from the Greens for progressive votes. At the 2010 election, the ALP lost the seat of Melbourne to the Greens for the first time in 100 years. At the same election, the ALP lost the seat of Dennison, based on the Tasmanian capital Hobart, to Green-turned-independent Andrew Wilkie. What these seats have in common are large numbers of young people, professional workers, and voters with secular outlooks. These voters are solidly progressive but are willing to look to parties other than Labor to represent them. Labor faces the challenge of responding to the Greens' attempts to capture these voters while at the same time needing to draw in other voting segments if it is to build a progressive majority.

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## The rising Green vote

One of the most dramatic shifts in voting during the 2010 campaign was toward the Greens. For the first time in a federal campaign, the Greens were successful in attaining a seat in the lower house and representation in the Senate from each state jurisdiction. The rise of the Green vote presents an existential challenge for a social-democratic party like the Australian Labor Party. For the first time in the party's 120-year existence, Labor now faces a major electoral challenge to its left, rather than just being in competition with the conservative forces to its right (see Figure 10).

This was particularly pronounced in the inner-city, urban electorates, which have traditionally housed the more progressive tendency within the ALP. These inner-city voters have in greater numbers than ever before taken to the Green Party



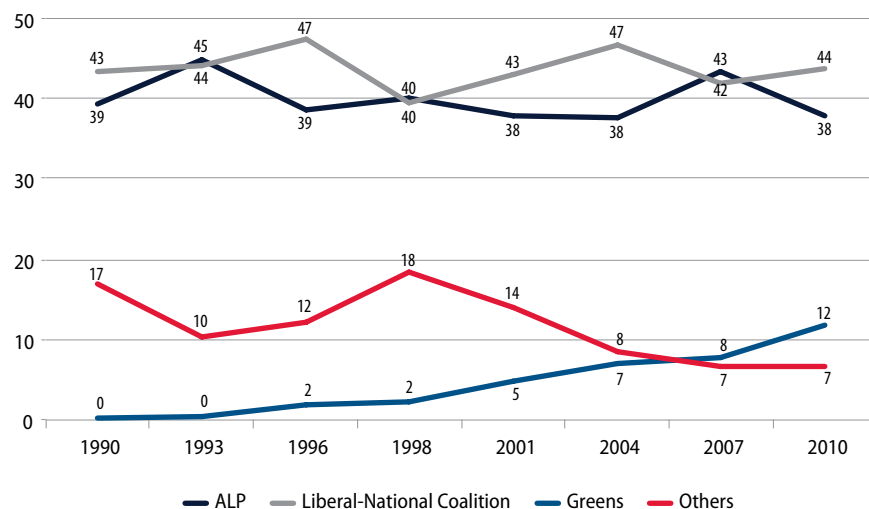
message, including on action on climate change, in support of asylum seeker rights, and in relation to the cluster of issues that could be broadly termed “postmaterial” in Australia’s large metropolitan centers. This is reflected in part by the social composition of this emerging social base for the Green Party.

The problem for Labor is double edged. While Labor loses votes to a party that positions itself to the left on climate change and environment, it is also electorally “wedged” to the right on the issue of asylum seekers which remains a potent and divisive issue in Australian politics. In the 2010 election, Labor lost voters to the Greens on the basis of environmental issues as well as concerns over asylum seekers while also losing votes to the Coalition on the asylum seeker issue—but from the right. Clearly Labor’s ability to find bridge issues into these two diverse constituencies will in large part determine to what extent Labor is able to grow its declining base of voters.

**FIGURE 10**

### Greens have been increasing their share of first-preference votes

Vote share as a percentage of total first-preference votes, 1990-2010



Source: Australian Electoral Commission.

# The new progressive coalition

In Australian politics, at the national level in any event, the challenge for Labor is not how to build a progressive coalition but how to lead it. Over the past 20 years, key segments have of the electorate have grown, to the benefit of the Labor vote: single, separated, and divorced women; Generation X and Millennial generation voters; voters belonging to non-Christian religions; secular voters; and voters from professional backgrounds.

Despite the swing against the ALP at the 2010 election, none of these segments moved sharply to the conservative Coalition. While ALP suffered very substantial swings in 2010 in some of the areas listed as being positive for the party, such as the heavily multicultural suburbs, the ALP vote was still far above the national average in most of these places. The ALP did *not* generally lose those areas but in many of them its majorities were sharply reduced.

Moreover, ethnic voters appear to be a considerably weaker predictor of ALP votes than three years ago. Multicultural suburbs still tend to record a higher-than-average ALP vote, but the relationship is not as strong or as statistically significant in 2010 as it was in 2007. In addition, both families with children and several categories of blue-collar workers were key drivers of the 2007 swing, but appeared to bear no relationship to the swing in 2010.

Other parts of the ALP (and conservative) base appear to have held across the two elections. Affluent areas are just as conservative as they were in 2007 and areas with large numbers of nontraditional households remain skewed to the left. While some of the relationships are weaker than before, the demographic predictors of the ALP primary vote in 2010 remain broadly similar to the previous election.

What these results tell demographers and psephologists (political scientists who study election data) is that Labor's once-dominant position on the left of Australian politics is now being challenged from the "left" by the Green Party and from the "right" by conservatives who are able to exploit voter dissatisfaction with the management of the asylum seeker issue, and who have fears about the national economic credentials of Labor.

# Conclusion

Australian Labor emerges from the 2010 election cycle in a contradictory position: On the one hand it has suffered electoral defeat in Victoria and Western Australia and a near miss in the most recent federal election, but on the other hand its vision and values are largely affirmed by an Australian public suspicious of a conservative agenda in health, education, and in the workplace.

In the most recent federal election, Labor's electoral woes did not arise because of its response to the global recession but rather because of Labor's perceived inability to deliver on the next generation of social-democratic challenges such as designing and implementing an effective market on carbon and having effective policies to manage the movement of people across national borders.

Labor's social-democratic vision is now also coming under sustained electoral assault from a challenger positioning itself to the left in the Green Party, but ironically they are largely prosecuting their case against Labor by attempting to appear "more social democratic" than their older rival. An ecological and postmaterial agenda is insufficient to weaken Labor's hold on the progressive electorate in Australia and it is only by attempting to flank Labor on health and education, on workplace rights, and other social-democratic issues that the Green Party can hope to break sufficient support away from Labor. Some successes in breaking trade unions from Labor's support base will embolden the Green Party, yet this party may well have peaked for now electorally.

Labor now faces significant electoral challenges in Australia. The cycle at the state level is now turning, with long-term Labor governments being removed by voters who believe governments should periodically change, regardless of their success or otherwise.

At the national level, the party must now balance being in a minority government with the urgent need to aggressively push a clear reform agenda. Without control of the Lower House of Parliament, this will remain difficult throughout the current term. In this context, ensuring clear differentiation from the Green Party is essential.

For Australian Labor, the challenge is similar to the experience of other social-democratic movements around the world. There is an urgent need to ground Labor's current story in a much deeper and longer-term narrative about the role of Labor in shaping the Australian nation and its continuing role in being the only party that can realistically bring about change and reform in key policy areas.

This will assist Labor in closing off on the emerging threat to the left from the Green Party by fully exploiting its base social-democratic advantage. Labor should be able to articulate an agenda that combines policies for a growing and fair economy, with real improvements and investments in education, health, and super-fast broadband through a National Broadband Network.

It will also have to restore faith with its base and take immediate action to put a price on carbon and take action on climate change. Action on this issue remains a touchstone for many progressive Australians who had previously supported the party in 2007.

A potentially powerful new set of issues exist for Labor as a consequence of managing Australia through the global recession effectively. The majority of voters who remain susceptible to the conservative mantra of "low debt and no waste" are also exposed to continuing high living costs and are "time poor," working longer and harder to balance their own family budgets. These issues intersect across the postmaterial/material divide where Labor is potentially able to tell a stronger narrative about its reform credentials and its vision of fairness and equity. The work already completed on Australia's new Paid Parental Leave scheme indicates there remains strong potential to develop these issues further.

All of these issues will assist Labor to pull back together its winning electoral coalition. Australian Labor has always succeeded when it united two social constituencies into a single electoral base—working families in the outer suburbs, with progressives in the cities.

# Endnotes

- 1 Kevin Rudd, "Climate Change: Forging a New Consensus," Opening remarks to the National Climate Change Summit, March 31, 2007, available at [http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/H4OM6/upload\\_binary/h4om62.pdf](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/H4OM6/upload_binary/h4om62.pdf).
- 2 For the 10 critical areas discussed at the Australia 2020 Summit, see: "About the Summit," available at <http://www.australia2020.gov.au/about/index.cfm>.
- 3 David Uren, "Australia to avoid recession: OECD," *The Australian*, November 26, 2008, available at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/markets/australia-to-avoid-recession-oecd/story-e6frg91o-1111118143032>.
- 4 George Megalogenis, *Quarterly Essay: Trivial Pursuit: Leadership and the End of the Reform Era* (Collingwood, VIC, Australia: Black Inc., 2010).

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## About the authors

The Chifley Research Centre is committed to the advancement of public policy debate and progressive thinking in Australia. The Chifley Research Centre aims to provide a strong foundation for debate and practical policymaking. We seek to provide the commentary and analysis that can assist government, the Labor Party, and the progressive community to respond to the issues of today in new and creative ways.

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