
Blue-collar support for the Coalition

1987 to 2007

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Preface

This report was commissioned by Peter Browne from *Australian Policy Online* to examine *Newspoll* data covering the period 1987 to 2007. It is a companion piece to an earlier analysis of age-related voting intentions.¹ This report uses the same data to examine the voting intentions of blue-collar workers. The results of this analysis are presented below. They are written for a general audience, and make use of a series of graphs to illustrate the findings.

Thanks go to Sol Lebovic, then of Newspoll, and to Martin O'Shannessy, Cassandra Marks and Donna Ralfe, for assistance in providing data. Thanks also to Peter Browne for commissioning the research. I am grateful to Murray Goot for sharing the national election outcomes data with me and for providing valuable feedback on an earlier draft.

Introduction

Looking back in 2005 on the electoral fortunes of the ALP, Birrell and his colleagues reflected:

Why did Labor lose the Federal Elections of 1996, 1998, 2001 and 2004? The short answer is that, since 1996, the Party has lost its grip on the voting block that was once its lifeline. This the blue-collar constituency. In 1996, for the first time in the Party's history, a higher proportion of blue-collar males indicated that they voted for the Coalition than for Labor ([Birrell et al., 2005](#), p. 50).

After their victory in 1996, the Liberal Party's Andrew Robb drew a similar conclusion and concurred with the ABC's Barrie Cassidy that the Coalition had won 'a big swag of the blue-collar workers . . . the Howard battlers of Australia' ([Brent, 2004](#), p. 7). From then onward the 'legend' of the 'Howard battlers' became part of the dominant explanation for Howard's success. They came to be seen as a core part of the Coalition's winning edge over Labor for more than a decade and commentators observed that it was their desertion in 2007—after taking fright at Work Choices—which ended the Howard reign. Of course, the Howard battlers were always more than just the blue-collar voters; the phrase was quite elastic and also included low income white collar workers. However, as Peter Brent has argued, the category was largely a fiction and had no basis in 'electoral fact'.

Leaving aside the battlers, and returning to the more precise category of the blue-collar voter, Goot and Watson contested the extent of their movement into the ranks of Coalition voters. Looking back over the Howard decade they concluded:

although 'blue-collar' respondents did shift to the Coalition in 1996, they were hardly a loyal band; at least in terms of their first preferences, they deserted in large numbers in 1998 not to return

to the Coalition in anything like the same numbers until 2004 (Goot and Watson, 2007*b*, p. 254).

The fluctuating fortunes of the blue-collar vote are the theme of this paper. Rather than constituting a long-term trend, I argue that the blue-collar conservatism of the last twenty years has been a many varied thing. There have been peaks and troughs, and there has also been a strong geographical component to this variability. While this question of blue-collar support for the Coalition has often been bundled into other related issues, such as the decline of class politics or the ALP's loss of its working-class base, it's important to keep these themes separate (Goot, 1994; Scott, 2004, 2006). The interchangeability of terms is striking—working-class and blue-collar, middle-class and middle-income—not to mention the emergence of new terms like working-class aspirational, suburban battlers and, of course, Howard battlers (Burchell, 2003; Goot and Watson, 2007*a*).

One problem with many of the 'class' based voting analyses is the definition of class which is usually employed. It is invariably occupationally-based, ensconced within a long tradition of sociological stratification theory. Yet the perils of mapping occupation onto class seem often casually overlooked. The working class, by any definition, should include routine white-collar (and 'pink-collar') workers, yet these are often overlooked when writers use blue-collar and working class interchangeably. While the upper reaches of the occupational ladder more easily map to class, as in the concept of the 'professional-managerial class' (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, 1979), the middle ranks are full of anomalies. Take, for example, the Australia Bureau of Statistics ASCO (Australian Standard Classification of Occupations) category of para-professionals, which includes technicians, police and ambulance officers among others. This is an ASCO First Edition group of workers which the ABS (in its ASCO Second Edition) has promoted, by either moving individual occupations (like nurses) into the ranks of professionals, or by rebadging the category as a whole with the higher status term, 'associate' professionals.²

Rather than engage with this loose slippage between class and occupation, this paper simply focuses on blue-collar voters, those 'classic' manual occupations of tradespersons, production and transport workers, and labourers. There is no implicit claim here that this represents a distinct class, only that their work is largely manual. Historically, they have been strong supporters of the Labor Party, so changes in their voting behaviour have been an abiding interest among researchers since the 1960s. Such fluctuations do not represent major shifts in class politics, and they certainly don't presage long term trends, but they do point to the failure of the Labor party to protect the interests of manual workers since the mid 1980s. And, as this paper will show, these changes also reflect the promise—and the subsequent failure—of the Coalition to do likewise.

Those who have examined this subject have relied for their data on either individual level survey data or aggregate data. In the case of the former, the most common resource has been the series of surveys which form the Australian Electoral Study (AES).³ Aggregate data have been used by researchers like David and Stimson for the Queensland election and by Brent and by Birrell and his colleagues, for Federal elections. While these are valuable studies, problems of ecological inference can limit the usefulness of this kind of analysis for understanding the voting behaviour of individuals (Robinson, 1950; King, 1997).

The AES surveys have the advantage of providing a large range of demographic and attitudinal variables, but they provide only a relatively small number of usable observations: from around 1,200 to 2,200 for each election. By way of contrast, the Newspoll data used in this analysis is thin when it comes to additional variables, but it has a large number of observations: from 9,000 to 13,000 for each election. Moreover, it has quite extensive geographical coverage: survey data from all states is available, and the larger states have separate capital city data. The large number of observations makes it feasible to examine geographical differences in individual voter support in a way which is not possible with other data.

In what follows I look specifically at how the voting intentions of employed males have changed over the period 1987 to 2007, examining variations by socio-economic status (SES) and geography. SES here refers to the split between blue-collar occupations (tradespersons, production and transport workers, and labourers) and the remaining occupations. Limiting the study to employed males is an unfortunate restriction but is necessary because of the nature of the Newspoll data. Rather than ask the respondent for their occupation, the interviewer codes the respondent to the occupation of the 'main income earner'. So if the main income earner is a male blue-collar worker, but the respondent is a female part-time white-collar worker (a common family combination), then the voting intentions of this female white-collar worker are coded as blue-collar. This is clearly an unsatisfactory situation. By restricting the sample to the employed male population, most of the misleading aspects of this coding are removed.⁴ It is worth keeping in mind the fact that the white collar population is quite diverse: it includes both managers and professionals at one extreme and shop assistants and base-grade clerks at the other. It does not equate to a 'middle class' by any stretch of that definition. This also means that the starker differences between 'working class' and 'middle class' which one might expect to find do not map onto the 'blue-collar' and 'white-collar' populations in this analysis. Indeed, the gap between the voting intentions of these two groups is somewhat muted because of this expansive white-collar category. Because this report steers clear of attempts to map collar onto class, this presents no problem. The white-collar voters should be thought of as simply a 'non-blue-collar' group, as simply a contrast to help in understanding what might be distinctive about the blue-collar voter.

Findings

Methodology

The results are presented as line graphs, which represent the predicted probability of supporting the Coalition in the forthcoming election in each of the years. These predictions are derived from a logistic regression model which included the year of the election, age group, age left school, socio-economic status (SES) and geographical area. Both geography and the SES variable were interacted against the election year variable, thereby allowing for the effects of these two variables to vary for each election. Age does not enter the model as an interaction, but only as a control. This means that the lines in the graph simply move up or down, depending on whether the predictions are based on older or younger voters. The latter are more inclined to support the Coalition, the latter much less so. The age group chosen for these predictions is the 40 to 44 age group. These are respondents who are close to 'neutral' when it comes to Coalition support so they represent a good option for examining the main issues for this report, namely, SES and geography. What matters here is not the overall level of support (which can shift up or down, depending on age) but the patterns over time and over geography. These vary because of the interactive nature of the model and it will be these patterns which form the basis of the commentary below.

As mentioned, the key findings are presented as a series of line graphs. While the data are not actually continuous, line graphs make reading the results somewhat easier than a set of points. These graphs show how support for the Coalition changed over the period 1987 to 2007 for each blue-collar and white collar group. To benchmark these lines and thereby ease comparisons, a red dotted line is used to indicate the actual vote at the Federal election in that year. This vote is the national vote, not the vote in that geographical area.

Based as they are on predicted probabilities from a non-linear model (that is, the logistic regression model), the data in these graphs take their values from ‘plugging in’ a set of characteristics into the model equation. With continuous predictors it is common to plug in mean values. With categorical variables, the choice is less clearcut. In this case, the values are: leaving school at year 10 and aged 40 to 45. These are quite realistic values for the male, blue-collar voter with low levels of formal education upon which the political debates around the ‘Howard battlers’ have focussed. The other variables—SES and geographic area—were systematically varied to produce the predicted probabilities shown in the graphs below. The results in Table 1 show these predictions and also indicate whether the difference between white collar and blue-collar support is statistically significant.

Looking at the dotted red line, it is clear that the electoral fortunes of the Coalition are characterised by two peaks (1996 and 2004) and two reasonably sharp drops (1998 and 2007). The early 1990s are essentially flat, though a slight upward trend is evident, with 1993 an improvement over 1990. In the following geographical breakdown, we sometimes observe the same overall pattern, but more often we observe a variation, one which is sensitive to both SES and geographical factors. It is these variations which provide the basis for this analysis. In particular, I am interested in the relationship between blue-collar support and white-collar support over the period 1987 to 2007. In what periods did they converge and what geographical areas saw different patterns in convergence?

Finally, it’s important to realise that the ‘sum’ of the voting intentions expressed by these blue-collar and white-collar respondents will not always correspond with the national vote. Not only are women excluded from this analysis, but so are those who are retired from the workforce, a group well known for their strong support of the Coalition. These exclusions explain why it is possible for both blue-collar and white-collar support for the Coalition to be falling, while the dotted red line remains stable (or rises).

Geographical differences

Support for the Coalition among blue-collar voters was never particularly strong in Sydney. Apart from 1996 and 2001, the level of support remained consistently below the national voting figures. When blue-collar and white collar voting converged in these two years, this was mainly due to dramatic increases in support for the Coalition among blue-collar voters. The convergence in the blue-collar and white-collar support after 2001 reflects a drop in support among white-collar supporters. Turning to non-metropolitan NSW, there is a higher level of overall support for the Coalition, but it is not particularly noteworthy and certainly falls below the level of non-metropolitan support evident in the other states (see below). Non-metropolitan NSW sees

blue-collar support for the Coalition as essentially flat for much of the period, with a notable drop in 2007. Only in three years—1987, 1996 and 2001—do blue and white collar voters stand apart. For much of the period their responses to the Coalition follow similar trajectories, and the spikes in support for the Coalition are more pronounced among the white-collar voters.

In Melbourne, support for the Coalition among blue-collar voters showed the familiar peak in 2001, before a big drop in 2004 and 2007. By contrast, support among white-collar voters rose sharply in 1993, but from then onwards began a steady downhill slide. Non-metropolitan Victoria presents quite a different picture. The familiar regional pattern is evident, with overall support for the Coalition much higher. Until 1998 blue-collar support was also notably high, with no difference between the level of blue-collar and white-collar support. The crash in 1998 saw a sharp divergence open up, though this closed again in 2001 and 2004 when blue-collar voters returned to the Coalition. In 2007 this support reversed, but blue-collar and white-collar profiles converged because the white-collar support for the Coalition had been steadily falling since 2001.

Adelaide departs from the national trend. In particular, blue-collar support peaked in 1993, not in 1996 (though 2001 represented another, somewhat smaller, peak). Moreover, the convergence between white-collar and blue-collar support took place much earlier—from 1987 to 1993—rather than in later years. In non-metropolitan South Australia the blue-collar and white-collar levels of support were essentially the same, except for three years: 1987, 1996 and 1998. The picture in 1998 was the familiar nadir of blue-collar support for the Coalition, something which paralleled the situation in most other locations.

Brisbane stands out as quite distinctive. Blue-collar support for the Coalition was in a steady decline for much of the period, with 1996 and 2004 the only years which broke from this trend. The large drops in support in 1998 and in 2007 were something shared nationwide, though in Queensland the impact of One Nation in 1998 should not be discounted, particularly on the urban fringes (Davis and Stimson, 1998). White-collar support was also falling in Brisbane for much of the period, but the level of support remained consistently higher. In non-metropolitan Queensland blue-collar support for the Coalition began to steadily decline after 1996 and by 2004 it reached its lowest point, a level which took it below the national voting figures in that year. Its failure to revive in 2001—an almost universal trend elsewhere—may again have been due to the impact of One Nation. In 2007, the blue-collar and white-collar convergence resumed, partly because of a blue-collar lift in Coalition support and partly because of a continuing drop in white-collar support for the Coalition. The rise in Coalition blue-collar support in 2007 is quite striking, and a marked departure from the pattern in many other states. By 2007, One Nation was no longer a political force to be reckoned with so perhaps this revival in blue-collar support reflected the return of that support base to the Coalition.

Western Australia presents some unusual trends. In Perth, the period is characterised by a long-term trend in declining white-collar support for the Coalition, something which leads to convergence between blue-collar and white-collar voters during the period 2001 to 2004. The blue-collar trend is also distinctive: support is flat during the late 1980s and early 1990s, before beginning to slide. Unlike the national trend, 1996 does not represent a peak of support. Rather, 2001 sees the Coalition attaining its highest level of blue-collar support. From there it is downhill, with a big drop in 2007. Perth stands in contrast to non-metropolitan Western Australia. Here blue-collar support for the Coalition falls steadily from 1987 right through to 2001. Interestingly, in 2004 and 2007 (perhaps on the back of the resources boom), blue-collar support begins to climb steadily, with 2007 showing a solid boost in Coalition support, a situation similar to that in Queensland. As for white-collar voters, apart from a sharp revival in 1993, the Coalition's support among this group also shows long term decline.

Finally, for Tasmania there is no geographical sub-division shown (because of the smaller sample size).⁵ The Tasmanian picture is an interesting one. Blue-collar support for the Coalition was high in the late 1980s—not only above the national voting figures, but comparable to the level of white-collar support. However, from then on it declined, with two key periods punctuating this decline. In 1996 it peaked, then crashed in 1998, before heading upward in 2001 and reaching a new peak in 2004. This coincided with Mark Latham's poorly-received forestry policy. In 2007, on the other hand, blue-collar support for the Coalition plummeted, presumably due to the impact of Work Choices and the absence of any environmental issues (the Pulp Mill and the Forestry positions of the ALP having been safely disposed of as election issues). White-collar support for the Coalition throughout the entire period was in steady decline, converging with the blue-collar vote but not sharing its revivals in 1996 and 2004.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis makes it very clear that support for the Coalition over the period 1987 to 2007 can be characterised as a general pattern overlaid with specific regional variations. In summary, there are major contours across the period—spikes of blue-collar support for the Coalition in 1996, 2001 and 2004—and near fatal collapse in 1998. The absence of a 1996 spike in some areas, for example, in South Australia and Victoria, is notable and no doubt reflects a particular combination of blue-collar fortunes and geography.

In terms of geography there are consistently higher levels of blue-collar support in non-metropolitan areas. But there are also periods and places where increasing convergence between white-collar and blue-collar voters reflects drops in white-collar support for the Coalition, rather than increased

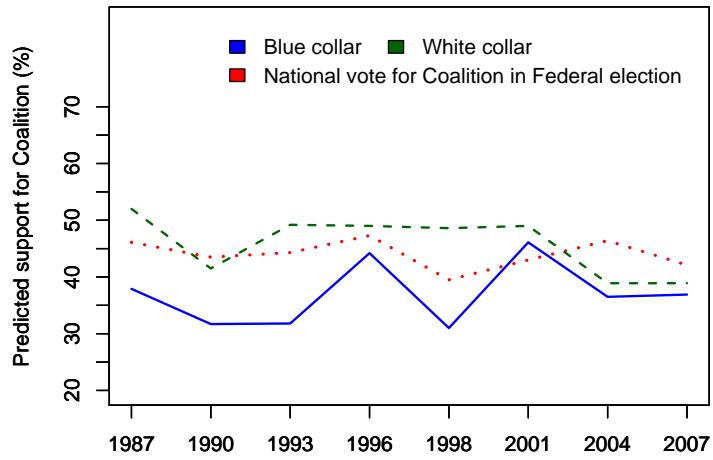
enchantment by blue-collar voters. The regional variations appear to reflect the peculiarities of that area: for example, the impact of One Nation in Queensland, the resources boom in Western Australia and the forestry issue in Tasmania.

As for enduring trends, they appear mostly absent. There is no solid evidence for a long-term movement of blue-collar voters away from the ALP. If anything, any trends which are apparent seem to reflect long term decline in support for the Coalition, and this applies to both white-collar and blue-collar voters. Any trends we do observe among blue-collar voters seem to reflect a disenchantment with Labor in the first half of the 1990s, a brief flirtation with the Coalition in 1996 and from 2001 to 2004, and a stark disenchantment with the Conservatives at the end of the period. This seems more pronounced among regional voters, than among those living in the cities.

While the patterns of political support discussed in this report are restricted to mature-aged male voters, the implications are more general. So what conclusions might we draw? I would argue that those commentators who saw 1996 as the harbinger of a new kind of alignment in Australian politics are unlikely to draw comfort from the analysis presented in this report. It's not that 1996 was an aberration: it was the culmination of blue-collar frustration with Labor during the late 1980s and early 1990s. If anything, 1993 was the aberration: the Hewson agenda on Medicare, the GST, and industrial relations gave blue-collar voters such a fright that they returned to Paul Keating in large numbers. How quickly Howard shocked blue-collar voters, with his first wave of 'reforms' was evident in the massive drop in support in 1998. How quickly he lost them again with his senate-controlled second wave was evident in the next large drop in 2007.

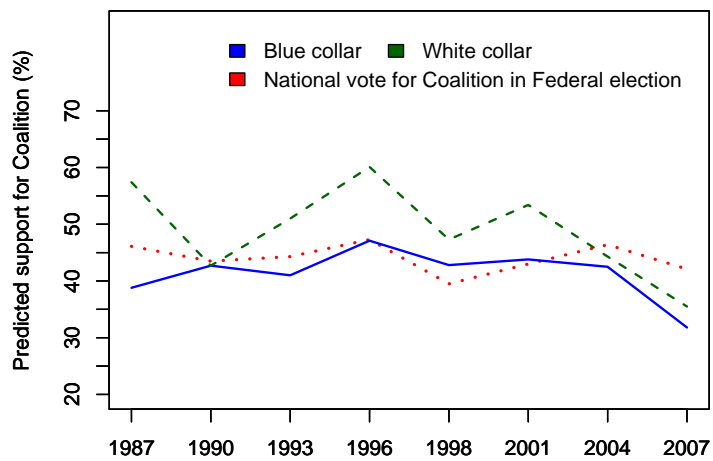
The analysis in this report also casts doubt on the notion that Howard ushered in a cultural revolution in Australia politics, in which a new kind of self-centred, individualistic and aspirational approach to life became widespread. As Birrell and his colleagues noted, social researcher Hugh Mackay characterised Australian voters as a group who 'approach elections from a selfish point of view, reflecting their preoccupation with gratifying themselves through individual gains in income and consumption' (Birrell et al., 2005, pp. 50–51). I would argue, however, that cultural explanations only go a short way in explaining blue-collar voting behaviour. Of greater importance were the economic changes which the ALP unleashed during the 1980s, and which came to a head for many blue-collar workers in the disastrous recession of 1991–92. As this report has shown, it was during this earlier period that many blue-collar workers shifted allegiance to the Coalition. For many of these voters, Howard came to symbolise economic security, and it was this, rather than his social conservatism or his neo-liberalism, which they embraced. When that neo-liberalism went the final mile, in the guise of Work Choices, the die was cast and these blue-collar voters returned in droves to the ALP.

Figure 2.1: Support for Coalition, Sydney



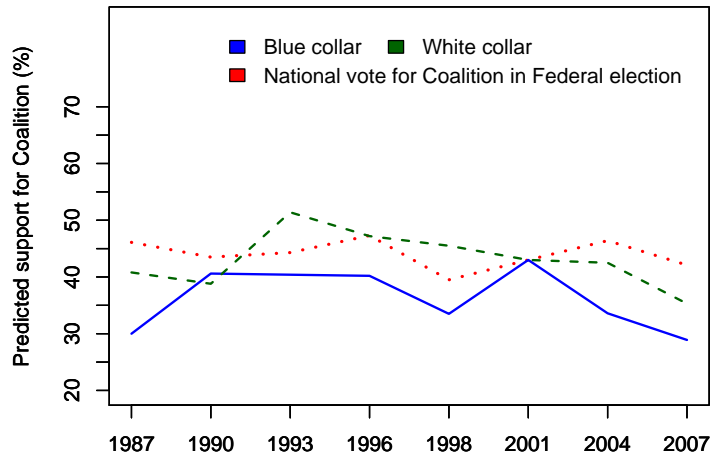
Source: Table 1

Figure 2.2: Support for Coalition, non-metropolitan NSW



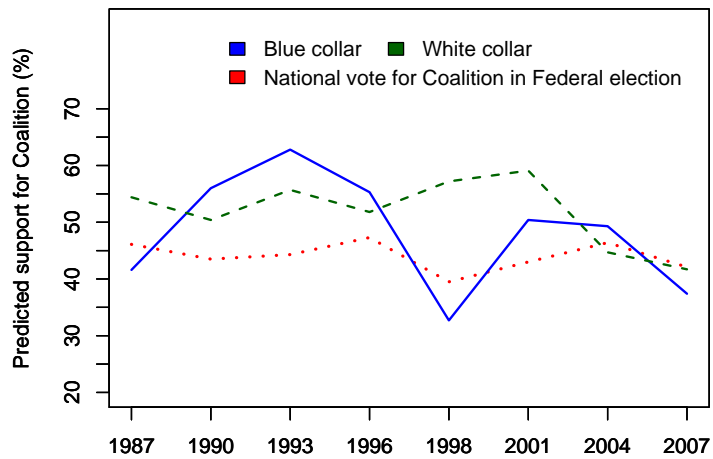
Source: Table 1

Figure 2.3: Support for Coalition, Melbourne



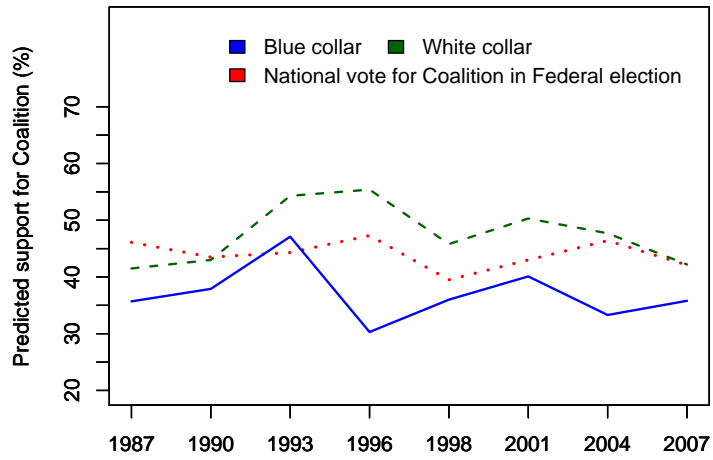
Source: Table 1

Figure 2.4: Support for Coalition, non-metropolitan Victoria



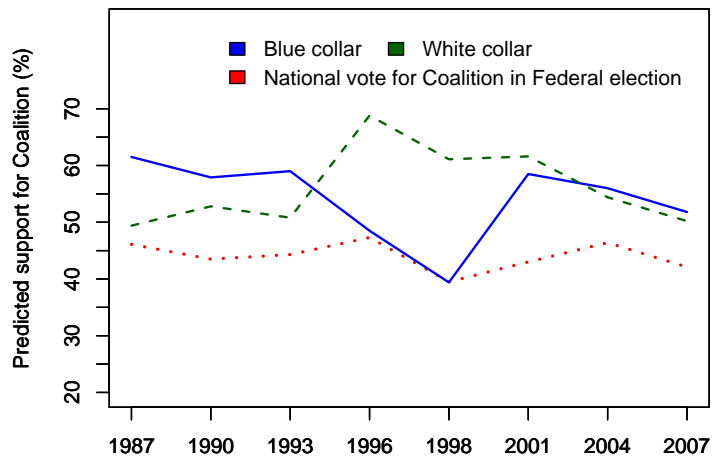
Source: Table 1

Figure 2.5: Support for Coalition, Adelaide



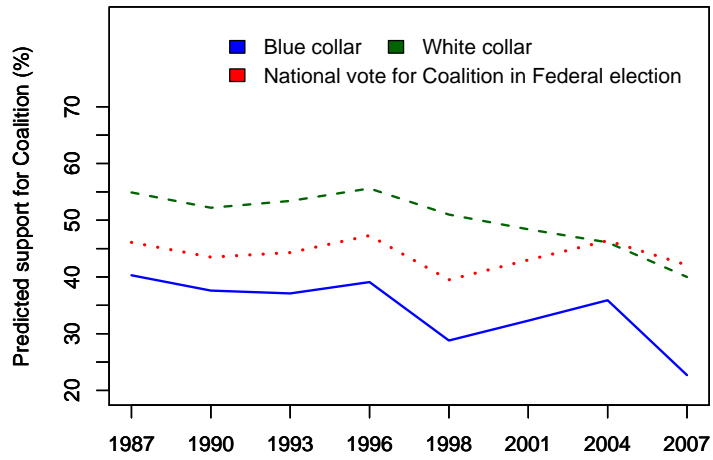
Source: Table 1

Figure 2.6: Support for Coalition, non-metropolitan SA



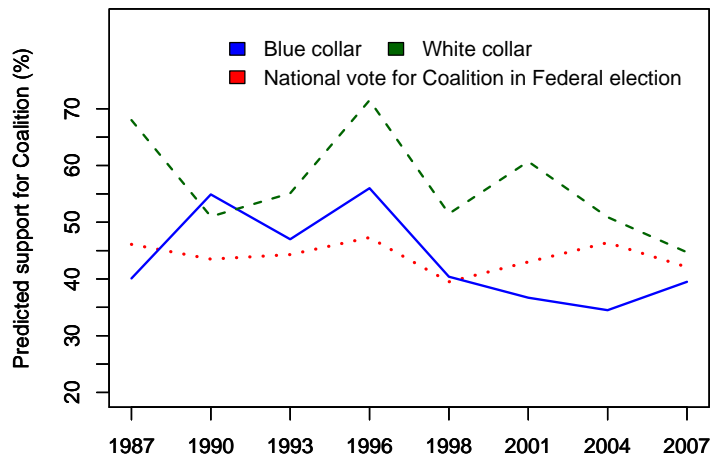
Source: Table 1

Figure 2.7: Support for Coalition, Brisbane



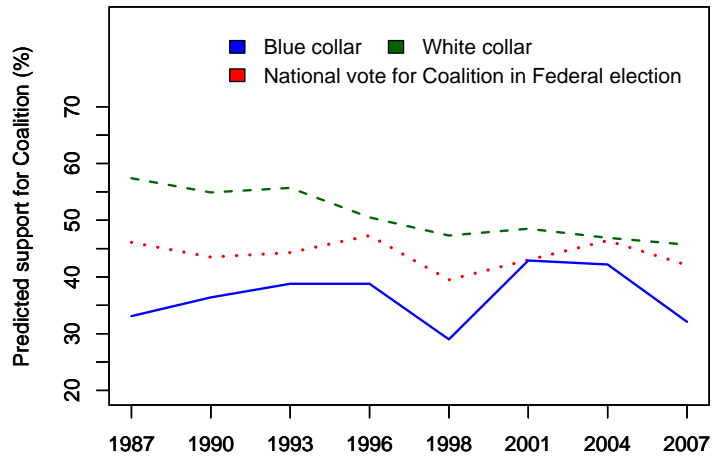
Source: Table 1

Figure 2.8: Support for Coalition, non-metropolitan Qld



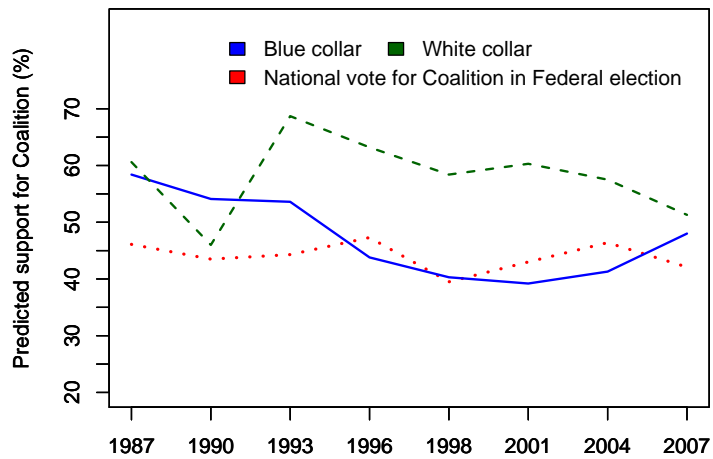
Source: Table 1

Figure 2.9: Support for Coalition, Perth



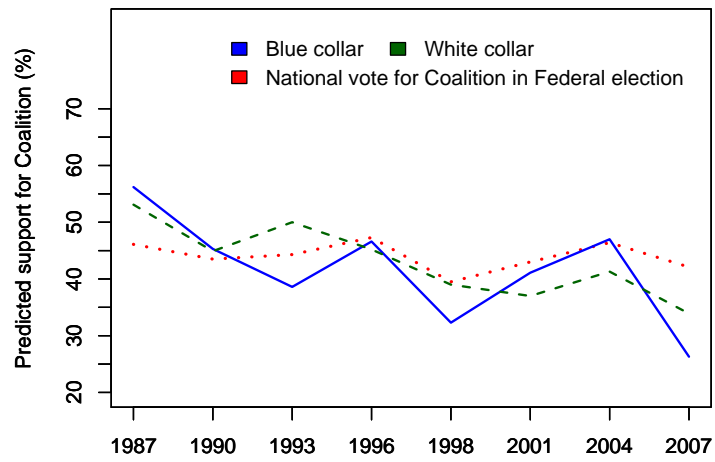
Source: Table 1

Figure 2.10: Support for Coalition, non-metropolitan WA



Source: Table 1

Figure 2.11: Support for Coalition, Tasmania



Source: Table 1

Table 1: Predicted support for the Coalition, by geographical area (%)

	1987	1990	1993	1996	1998	2001	2004	2007
Sydney								
Blue collar	37.9	31.7	31.8	44.2	31.0	46.1	36.5	36.9
White collar	52.0	41.5	49.2	49.0	48.6	49.0	38.9	38.9
Difference	14.0*	9.7*	17.4*	4.7	17.6*	2.9	2.4	2.0
Rest of NSW								
Blue collar	38.8	42.7	41.0	47.1	42.8	43.8	42.5	31.8
White collar	57.4	42.7	51.0	60.1	47.3	53.4	44.3	35.5
Difference	18.6*	0.0	10.0	13.0*	4.4	9.6	1.8	3.7
Melbourne								
Blue collar	30.0	40.6	40.4	40.2	33.5	43.0	33.6	28.9
White collar	40.8	38.8	51.4	47.2	45.5	43.0	42.5	35.3
Difference	10.8*	-1.8	10.9*	7.1	12.0*	0.0	8.9*	6.4
Rest of Victoria								
Blue collar	41.6	56.0	62.8	55.3	32.7	50.4	49.3	37.4
White collar	54.4	50.4	55.7	51.8	57.2	59.1	44.7	41.7
Difference	12.8	-5.6	-7.1	-3.5	24.5*	8.8	-4.6	4.3
Adelaide								
Blue collar	35.7	37.9	47.1	30.3	36.0	40.1	33.3	35.8
White collar	41.5	43.0	54.3	55.4	45.8	50.3	47.7	42.2
Difference	5.8	5.1	7.2	25.0*	9.7	10.3	14.4*	6.5
Rest of SA								
Blue collar	61.5	57.9	59.0	48.5	39.4	58.5	56.0	51.8
White collar	49.4	52.8	50.8	68.8	61.1	61.6	54.4	50.2
Difference	-12.1	-5.1	-8.2	20.3*	21.7*	3.1	-1.5	-1.6
Brisbane								
Blue collar	40.3	37.6	37.1	39.1	28.8	32.3	35.9	22.7
White collar	54.9	52.2	53.4	55.6	51.0	48.4	46.1	40.0
Difference	14.6*	14.5*	16.2*	16.5*	22.2*	16.2*	10.2	17.3*
Rest of Qld								
Blue collar	40.1	54.9	47.0	56.0	40.4	36.7	34.5	39.5
White collar	68.0	51.0	55.1	71.5	51.5	60.7	50.9	44.7
Difference	27.9*	-3.9	8.1	15.5*	11.1*	24.0*	16.5*	5.2
Perth								
Blue collar	33.1	36.4	38.8	38.8	29.0	42.9	42.2	32.1
White collar	57.4	54.9	55.7	50.5	47.3	48.5	46.9	45.7
Difference	24.4*	18.5*	16.9*	11.8	18.3*	5.6	4.7	13.6*
Rest of WA								
Blue collar	58.4	54.1	53.6	43.8	40.3	39.2	41.3	48.0
White collar	60.6	46.0	68.7	63.2	58.4	60.3	57.5	51.3
Difference	2.2	-8.1	15.1	19.3*	18.1*	21.1*	16.2*	3.3
Tasmania								
Blue collar	56.2	45.3	38.6	46.6	32.3	41.1	47.0	26.3
White collar	53.1	44.9	50.0	45.2	39.0	37.0	41.3	33.9
Difference	-3.0	-0.3	11.5	-1.4	6.7	-4.2	-5.8	7.6
National vote in each election								
All persons	46.1	43.5	44.3	47.3	39.5	43.0	46.4	42.1

Notes: * indicates statistically significant differences (at 0.05 level)

White collar is defined by the following ASCO (Edition 2) categories: Managers/Admin Professionals; Associate professionals; Advanced clerical/service workers; Intermediate clerical/sales and service workers; Elementary clerical/sales and service workers.

Blue-collar includes: Tradespersons/related workers; Intermediate production/transport workers Labourers and related workers.

Source: Newspoll

Population: Male respondents who are currently employed.

Notes

¹See Watson, I. (2007) *Is demography moving against the Coalition? Age and the conservative vote in Australia, 1987 to 2004*, Report for Australian Policy Online, May 2007. This has subsequently been updated to include the results from 2007.

²In its very latest incarnation as ANZSCO, the ABS occupational taxonomy has largely removed the category, with technicians now grouped with tradepersons and a new category created which absorbs some of the others.

³As well as Goot and Watson, Bean and McAllister have written extensively on all the Federal elections using the AES data. See for example, [Bean and McAllister \(1997\)](#).

⁴There are other anomalies in the coding scheme which makes it necessary to restrict the sample to the employed population. Retired people are coded according to whether they are self-funded (white collar) or on a pension (blue collar), while students and the unemployed are both coded to blue collar.

⁵And the ACT is omitted altogether because of the small sample size.

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