Is demography moving against the Coalition?

Age and the conservative vote in Australia, 1987 to 2007

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Introduction

This report was commissioned by Peter Browne from *Australian Policy Online* to examine Newspoll data for age-related patterns in voting intentions. The starting point was the observation that:

> Around the time of the [2004] federal election there was speculation that voter demographics were moving against the government, on the argument that a very conservative group of older voters was inevitably giving way to a younger, less conservative group. We were interested to see whether the Newspoll data showed any trends that supported that view and, correspondingly, conflicted with the standard view that as voters age they become more likely to vote for the Coalition.

The results from an examination of the Newspoll data are presented below. They are written for a general audience, and make use of a series of graphs to illustrate the findings. While there are some technical issues involved, these are presented in a separate section afterwards. The findings are also presented as tables (in Part 3).

Thanks go to Sol Lebovic, then of Newspoll, and to Martin O'Shannessy, Cassandra Marks and Donna Ralfe, for assistance in providing data. Thanks to Sol also for discussing preliminary findings with *Australian Policy Online*. I am grateful to Murray Goot, Anthony Green and Humphrey McQueen for feedback and useful advice, and to Peter Browne for commissioning the report. This current report is an update of the version released in mid-2007 and contains the results of the Newspoll polling prior to the 2007 federal election.

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Findings

Introduction

Does demography favour the Liberal/National Party Coalition in Australia, or is there a shift underway in the opposite direction? As is well known, the Howard Coalition Government (1996 to 2007) struck a chord with older Australian during the last decade. (See, for example, Leigh (2005, pp. 16–18) and Goot and Watson (2007, p. 261).) This group of voters have consistently favoured the Liberal/National Parties since the mid 1990s, with the first preference vote for the Coalition for those aged 60 and over averaging well over 50 per cent. This idea that older voters support conservative parties has been around since at least the 1950s and various reasons have been advanced to explain this (Schmidhauser, 1958). Older people are said to be more materialistic and more authoritarian, making them more at home in conservative ranks (Goerres, 2008, p. 2). It has also been claimed that as people age, so they become more conservative. This 'life cycle' thesis was seen as conventional wisdom by *The American Voter* when it was published in the early 1960s. The claim was soon contested by the view that conservatism among older people was due to a generational effect, something rooted in their socialisation experiences (Tilley, 2002, pp.121–122). A long debate has since ensued.

This debate grapples with a difficult empirical problem. In examining the voting intention patterns of the population over an extended period of time, three separate phenomena are evident: birth cohort effects (which lie behind the generational thesis), age effects (the life cycle thesis) and period effects (historical events or context). Thus an older person may vote the way they do because of their formative years—entering adulthood during the 1930s depression for example—or they may vote the way they do because of their stage in life—on the pension and contemplating financial insecurity. Finally, a particular election may highlight policies—such as pension increases—which appeal disproportionately to older voters. All three influences may operate together, so any conclusions about what induced in-

creased support for a particular party cannot be uniquely attributed to any one of them.

Cohort effects are part of the shared socialisation experiences which form people as a generation, something which usually happens in their youth: 'the political environment in which a particular birth cohort first enters the electorate may help determine the extent to which individuals in that cohort identify with a political party for the remainder of their lives.'(Mason, Karen Oppenheim et al., 1973, p. 244). Tilley also argues (in the British context):

> Firstly the young are 'impressionable'; political events affect their partisanship more strongly than their elders. Secondly, these partisan alignments found in youth are, to some extent, enduring over time. All things being equal the voter who came of age in 1945 should bear some remnants of this landslide Labour victory in their partisan attitudes and behaviour many years later. There is a substantial amount of evidence for these two linked processes (2002, p. 122).

As Mannheim observed, the older generation 'still cling to the re-orientation that had been the drama of their youth' (Tilley, 2002, p. 135). Clearly, the early 'baby boomers'—those born in the decade after 1945—constitute a 'political generation' and their formative political years were the late 1960s and 1970s. This was an era of political and social radicalism in Australia, and while not every young person went to Sunbury or Nimbin, the impact of the Vietnam War, feminism, Aboriginal Land Rights, and environmental activism on young people was widespread, particularly within the universities where the student intake expanded massively during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many of these students were the children of working-class parents, and the first generation in their family to progress educationally past high school. If ever a 'political generation' was left-leaning, this generation was.

As with most Western countries, Australia's population is ageing. In the ten years to 2006, those aged in their 50s grew from 10 per cent of the population to nearly 13 per cent. This demographic trend raise an interesting question: should we expect the current pattern of older voter support for the Coalition to continue undisturbed or might we see a movement away from the Coalition as the bulge of 'baby boomers' move into the ranks of older Australians and moderate this conservatism. This paper is a brief attempt to answer this question by drawing on a well-known data source, Newspoll. While it is always difficult to be definitive with these kinds of questions, the attempt is certainly worthwhile. The results below suggest that demography will *not* be on the side of the Coalition in coming years. As the 'baby boomers' age, the voting patterns of older Australians appear to be changing, and changing in a direction which is adverse to the Liberal/National Party vote.

Analysis

The analysis in this report draws on 20 years of Newspoll public opinion polling data. People's voting intentions in the lead up to the Federal elections from 1987 through to 2007 are analysed by age groups (in five year brackets).[1] The results are shown as a series of graphs and tables (Appendix) and the key findings are presented below. For ease of expression, the terms 'support for' and 'voting intention' are used interchangeably.[2] The 'birth cohorts' for this study are the five year age groups, while the term 'generation' is reserved for those birth cohorts making up the baby boomers, in this case, those born in the decade after 1945. The term baby boomer is often applied to a longer birth cohort, such as 1945 to 1964. However, the 'political generation' analysed here is essentially those whose late teens and early adulthood coincided with the late 1960s and early 1970s, which means that their birth cohort was the decade after 1945.

Before discussing the results, it's worth reflecting on the difficulty of separating age effects, cohort effects and period effects. In statistical terms, the outcome of interest—voter support—is the product of the additive effects of age, cohort and period. As such, these three effects are always confounded, and without additional outside information, attempts to precisely disentangle these three effects are formidable. (See the original exposition of this in Glenn (1977), Glenn (1976) and Mason, Karen Oppenheim et al. (1973), and more recent attempts to get around the problem in Tilley (2002)). The most useful approach is a fairly simple one: visual inspection of the data and deployment of contextual knowledge, such as the political history of the baby boomers. As Glenn demonstrates, one can discern strong age, cohort or period effects by visual inspection of cohort tables. The effects have to be fairly strong, not only because of the confounding problem, but also because of the sampling variability which each survey contains (see Glenn (1977, pp. 46ff)).

In the case of this analysis, cohort tables—which cross tabulate age cohorts by periods—are not practical. With one exception (see below) the lack of exact birth dates makes it impossible to construct cohort tables where the age groups line up with the years in which elections were held. Rarely did the latter fall on neat five year intervals, whereas the birth cohorts are all based on five year groups. Instead, the strategy employed here is a graphical one. By comparing the support for the Coalition among all age groups with the support among specific age groups, one can see where there is a trend emerging over time. By visually inspecting the graphs, we can examine whether the 'gap' between the all-age group average and the specific age

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[1] This analysis refers to first preference votes in the House of Representatives. The Newspoll data is weighted with weights supplied by Newspoll.

[2] Strictly speaking, Newspoll asks respondents about their voting intentions. While this may not translate into the same voting behaviour on election day, it does provide a reasonable measure of voter 'support'.

group has widened or narrowed. This helps deal with the problem of period effects because major electoral issues—like 'Tampa' in 2001 or 'Work Choices' in 2007—can shift the vote across all age groups in a certain direction. When the all-age average shifts in one direction, this can be viewed as a 'period effect', and the decisive boost in support for the Coalition in 1996, and for the ALP in 2007, are examples of this. While this helps with period effects, the answer to disentangling age and cohort effects relies on outside knowledge (about the baby boomers) and sharp movements in directions opposite to those expected from a life-cycle thesis. In other words, if the vote for the Coalition drops dramatically as one age group grows older, this would appear to support a cohort effect, whereas if it rises, this could be consistent with an aging effect. Finally, the sampling variability resulting from using survey data is dealt with by constructing confidence intervals, which are shown as lines in the graphs. (More on this below).

Before turning to the graphs, it's worth briefly examining the one cohort table which can be created from these data. The surveys for the years 1987 and 2007 provide data for such a table because this gap of 20 years is a multiple of the five year age groups. Table 2.1 presents the data based on this comparison. It shows the proportion of respondents, aged under 40, intending to vote for the Coalition in 1987; and the proportion of respondents—who are the same 5 year cohorts and are now aged over 40—intending to vote for the Coalition in 2007. It's important to remember that this is not panel data, so the people in these 5 year cohorts are not the same individuals, but they are the same birth cohorts. In the case of those aged 30 to 34 and 35 to 39 in 1987, we are looking at the core baby boomer generation (as it's defined in this paper). Their voting intentions twenty years later, in 2007, is remarkably similar to their intentions in 1987. This suggests that no aging effect is evident in their electoral behaviour. However, to more fully explore this possibility, it's worth turning now to the graphs, shown on pages 7 and 8.

Table 2.1: Support for the Coalition: same cohorts 1987 & 2007 (%)

Age in 1987	Intending to vote Coalition	Age in 2007	Intending to vote Coalition
18-24	37.9	40-44	38.4
25-29	34.2	45-49	36.0
30-34	35.6	50-54	35.1
35-39	40.5	55-59	40.5

Notes: 18–24 would need to be 20-24 to achieve a 'perfect match' for this cohort.
Source: Newspoll.
Population: Those persons aged under 40 in 1987 and those aged 40 and over in 2007.

Figure 2.1: Vote for Liberal/NCP Coalition, Younger Cohorts

Aged 18 to 24 years

Aged 25 to 29 years

Aged 30 to 34 years

Aged 35 to 39 years

Aged 40 to 44 years

Legend

- ● Mean for that age group
- ─ 95% CI for that age group
- ○ Mean for all age groups
- ─ 95% CI for all age groups

Note: Data weighted for means and confidence intervals
Source: Newspoll

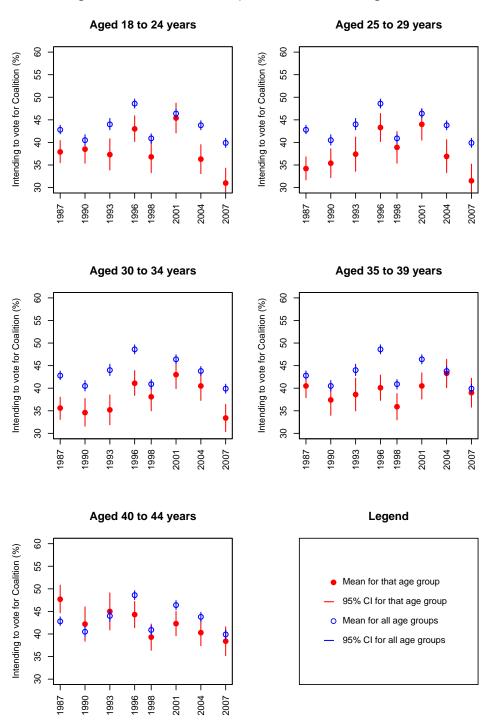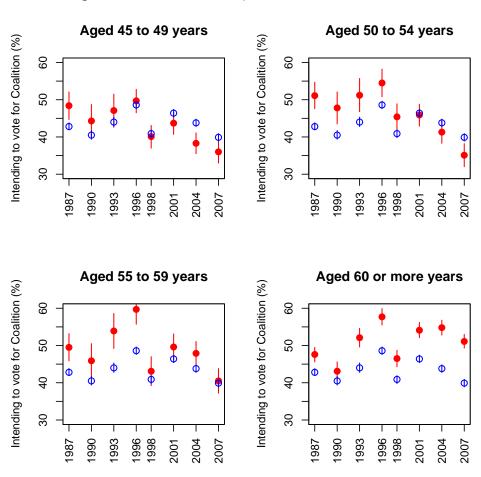**Figure 2.2:   Vote for Liberal/NCP Coalition, Older Cohorts**

Note: Data weighted for means and confidence intervals
Source: Newspoll

The all-age average pattern of support for the Coalition (hollow blue dots) shows a quite distinctive pattern.[3] After a fall in support between 1987 and 1990, the Coalition's fortunes improved in the 1990s, increasing steadily through to the Howard victory in 1996. 1998 saw a sharp drop in support for the Coalition, followed by a revival in 2001 (the 'Tampa' election). From then on it was a steady downhill slide until the 2007 election, Howard's end.

How does the support of older Australians compare? Looking at the solid red dots in Figure 2.2 (on page 8), it is clear that voters aged 60 and over largely followed the all-age average trend, but they have supported the Coalition to a much greater extent. Over this period, the age gap favouring the Coalition ranges from 5 to 10 percentage points. Only in 1990 was the gap not large enough to count as statistically significant. In every other year, there was a considerable gap. There is, of course, some variability in the size of this gap. In some years where the average support moved against the Coalition, the support by older voters increased and the gap widened (eg. 2001 to 2004). In other years, the gap narrowed (eg. 1996 to 1998).

If we look at the age group which is younger by five years (55 to 59) we also notice a similar pattern in the years leading up to 1998. As Figure 2.1 (on page 7) shows the gap between the overall average and this specific age-group was quite wide until 1998. However, for the years 1998 to 2004, the gap either disappeared or narrowed considerably. By 2007 the age-group vote virtually corresponded with the overall average, indicating that this age group was no longer any more conservative than the average. Now what is interesting about this age group—the 55 to 59 year olds—is that by around 2000 the first wave of 'baby boomers' had entered their ranks. Those born in 1945 or 1946 were turning 55 in 2000 and 2001. It is possible, therefore, that some of the downturn in Coalition support by this age group in the lead up to the elections of 2001 and 2004 reflects the arrival on the scene of some of these early 'baby boomers'. By 2007 some of these early 'baby boomers' had entered their 60s, but their presence in that age group (which includes everyone over 60) would be so slight as to make a negligible impact on the voting pattern. On the other hand, by 2007 the youngest among this 55 to 59 cohort were those born in 1952.

This notion finds more support in the data for the next younger age group—those aged 50 to 54. Their voting intention pattern up to, and including 1998, showed strong support for the Coalition. This age group consistently supported the Liberal/National Parties through all these years, though the gap began to close slightly in 1998. However, by 2001 this gap had evaporated entirely, and by 2007 the direction in support has reversed. This age

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[3] The coloured dots in these graphs show the mean (average) vote for the Coalition in each year and the coloured lines show 95 per cent confidence intervals around these means. Where confidence intervals overlap, this can indicate that the 'apparent' difference between the means is most likely due to sampling variability and the difference is regarded as not statistically significant.

group was now more likely to vote against the Coalition than the overall average. In 2001, this age cohort was made up entirely of early 'baby boomers': those born between 1947 and 1951 and by 2007 it included those born between 1953 and 1957.

Looking across the full set of graphs on pages 7 and 8, it is evident that as a general rule younger voters—those aged under 40—favoured the ALP over the Coalition. Voters in the middle-aged groups—those between 40 and 59 years—have a less clearcut pattern in their voting intentions. The tendency, however, is toward greater support for the Coalition among the older age groups, particularly in the earlier period (prior to 1998). Finally, as we saw above, voters aged 60 and above strongly favoured the Coalition over the ALP.

However, the data just discussed show that voters aged in their 50s are changing their electoral behaviour, but this has only happened for the last three elections. They have turned away from the Coalition and this coincides with a change in the composition of this age group: they are now made up of people born in the late 1940s and 1950s. In other words, the shift away from the Coalition among this particular group of older voters coincides with the arrival of the political generation based on the early 'baby boomers'.

As suggested earlier, this generation has more left-leaning individuals in its ranks that the generation which preceded it. The earlier, more conservative birth cohorts still dominate the current 'over 60s' age group and we should therefore not expect to see much change in their electoral behaviour in coming years.[4] However, the impact of the baby boomers on the voting behaviour of those currently in their fifties is more than evident in the data presented. This suggests that while the over 60s will continue to favour the Liberal/National Parties, the greying of the 'baby boomers' appears to be overturning this trend. This may well signal a demographic shift working against the Coalition in coming years.

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[4] This refers only to the plus 60s as a group. If the data allowed for a breakdown into 60 to 64 and 65 to 69, then we should indeed expect to see the impact of the baby boomers as they move through these age groupings.

Appendix

Technical considerations

It is important to realise that the Newspoll data are not panel data, where the same group of people are tracked over time. Rather, different sub-populations are recruited into the various samples across these years producing a time series of cross-sectional data. You can, of course, follow an age cohort through these kind of data, but it's important to keep in mind that the composition of the cohort will be changing over time. Not only do people die or emigrate, but new entrants–such as immigrants—join the cohort. Consequently, while we may talk about an 'age cohort' in these data, these reservations need to be kept in mind.

Secondly, because the data is based on a survey sample, the figures produced (called 'point estimates') always have a margin of error around them. This is due to sampling variability (also called sampling error). The strategy for dealing with this is to calculate a confidence interval (CI) for each of the point estimates. These CIs are shown as vertical bars in the graphs.

Confidence intervals provide a useful way of illustrating the sampling variability in these Newspoll data because they easily show the margin of error around the point estimates by providing a lower bound (or limit) and an upper bound. In the case of a 95 per cent confidence interval (the level used in this paper), these bounds can be defined as follows. If the sample were to be repeatedly taken, then in 19 out of 20 occasions, the true population value of the point estimate would lie within these bounds.

A common practice is to visually examine two point estimates and their associated confidence intervals. If the two confidence intervals do not overlap, then the difference between the two point estimates can be regarded as statistically significant. Conversely, if they do overlap, then the difference between the estimates may not be statistically significant. In the case of these Newspoll data, the mean value for an age group is compared with the mean value for all age groups and where the confidence intervals do not overlap, an age-related difference is evident.[5]

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[5] Another approach, often preferred to the confidence interval strategy, is to calculate the standard error of the difference. See, for example, Wolfe and Hanley (2002). However, the confidence interval approach lends itself to graphing data as carried out here.

Table 2: Voting by age group and year (percentages)

ALP	1987	1990	1993	1996	1998	2001	2004	2007	All
18-24	52.7	42.2	48.1	42.7	40.9	38.7	46.1	53.9	45.7
25-29	58.7	44.5	50.6	42.3	44.2	37.6	42.6	55.9	47.0
30-34	55.6	46.7	52.6	45.0	45.2	39.3	43.2	52.1	47.3
35-39	50.4	42.8	48.2	45.8	44.5	44.3	39.1	48.0	45.3
40-44	44.7	40.2	42.2	41.8	45.5	40.0	41.1	48.5	43.1
45-49	44.3	37.3	40.6	38.8	41.2	40.3	44.5	53.1	43.1
50-54	43.6	36.8	42.3	34.6	36.5	38.3	40.7	52.5	40.8
55-59	44.2	39.9	36.8	32.8	39.6	35.4	34.9	48.3	39.1
60 plus	46.5	44.8	39.8	34.5	36.8	34.8	34.3	41.3	38.9
Total	49.6	42.6	44.7	39.7	41.2	38.3	40.0	48.7	43.0

Lib/Nat	1987	1990	1993	1996	1998	2001	2004	2007	All
18-24	37.9	38.5	37.3	43.0	36.8	45.4	36.3	31.0	38.3
25-29	34.2	35.4	37.4	43.3	38.9	44.0	36.9	31.5	37.8
30-34	35.6	34.6	35.2	41.1	38.1	43.0	40.5	33.4	37.8
35-39	40.5	37.4	38.6	40.1	35.9	40.5	43.3	39.0	39.4
40-44	47.7	42.2	45.0	44.3	39.3	42.3	40.3	38.4	42.2
45-49	48.4	44.3	47.1	49.7	40.1	43.7	38.3	36.0	42.7
50-54	51.1	47.8	51.2	54.5	45.4	45.9	41.3	35.1	45.5
55-59	49.5	45.9	53.9	59.7	43.1	49.6	47.9	40.5	48.1
60 plus	47.6	43.1	52.1	57.7	46.5	54.1	54.8	51.1	51.2
Total	42.8	40.5	44.0	48.6	40.9	46.4	43.8	39.9	43.4

Other	1987	1990	1993	1996	1998	2001	2004	2007	All
18-24	9.4	19.3	14.6	14.3	22.3	15.9	17.6	15.1	16.0
25-29	7.1	20.2	12.0	14.4	16.9	18.4	20.5	12.6	15.2
30-34	8.9	18.6	12.3	13.9	16.7	17.7	16.3	14.5	14.9
35-39	9.1	19.8	13.2	14.1	19.6	15.2	17.6	13.1	15.2
40-44	7.5	17.6	12.7	13.9	15.2	17.7	18.6	13.1	14.7
45-49	7.3	18.4	12.4	11.5	18.7	16.0	17.1	10.9	14.2
50-54	5.3	15.4	6.5	10.9	18.0	15.8	18.0	12.4	13.7
55-59	6.3	14.2	9.3	7.5	17.3	14.9	17.2	11.2	12.7
60 plus	5.9	12.1	8.1	7.7	16.6	11.0	11.0	7.6	9.9
Total	7.5	16.9	11.2	11.7	17.9	15.2	16.1	11.5	13.6

Notes: Data weighted.
Source: Newspoll.
Population: Respondents eligible to vote who indicated a party voting intention.

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