

The Role of Preferences in the 2001 Election

Introduction

The question of which of the major parties has benefited most from the preferences of minor parties and independents has been the subject of discussion since the introduction of preferential voting in 1918.

In the modern era of Australian politics (post-1949) there has been a considerable shift in the direction of minor party preferences. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Coalition parties were the clear beneficiary of minor party preferences. The demise of the Democratic Labor Party and the advent of new centre-orientated parties in the 1970s resulted in the advantage enjoyed by the Coalition being substantially reduced. This trend has continued to such an extent that by the 1980s and early 1990s the Australian Labor Party enjoyed a substantial advantage.

During the 2001 election campaign considerable attention was given to preference deals between the various parties and the effect that such deals might have on the election outcome.

This Research Note examines the role of preferences in elections since 1984, provides details on the direction of preferences at the 2001 election and analyses the ability of the parties to control the flow of preferences.

Significance of Preferences

Since the expansion of the Parliament in 1984, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of divisions where preferences have been required, but there has not

been a corresponding increase in the number of divisions where the result has been changed by preferences.

Also of note is that the number of 'three-cornered' contests where preferences have been required has halved since 1984. Three-cornered contests are no longer as important as they once were in determining the number of divisions where preferences are required to be distributed. Of more significance in the last two elections has been the decline in first preference votes received by the major parties.

At the 2001 election preferences were required to be distributed in 87 divisions, but in only six divisions (Cowper, Paterson, Chisholm, Melbourne Ports, Brisbane and Hasluck) did a party win after trailing on first preference votes. In two divisions, Cowper and Paterson, the ALP lost in a 'three-cornered' contest while in the other four divisions the ALP won. The number of divisions where the result was changed by preferences was the lowest since 1987 (see Table 1).

Table 1 Coming from Behind

Election	Divisions Where Preferences Required		Divisions won from Behind
	Total	Three-Cornered Contests	
1984	44	35	12
1987	54	41	4
1990	92	29	8
1993	63	30	12
1996	65	15	7
1998	98	16	7
2001	87	16	6

Direction of Preferences

Although it would appear that preferences were not significant in determining the election outcome in 2001, there is still nevertheless considerable interest in knowing which of the major parties benefited most from preferences.

Table 2 shows the difference between the first preference votes and the two-party preferred vote for the major parties at each House of Representatives since 1984.

In each election held in the period, the Labor Party was the clear beneficiary of the aggregate preferences of minor parties and independents. However, in the 1996 and 1998 elections the Coalition was able to reduce the advantage enjoyed by the Labor Party somewhat.

While it is clear from the above that the Labor Party has been the main beneficiary of minor party and

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Table 2 House of Representatives Elections 1984-2001
Per cent

Election	First Preference Votes (a)	Two-Party Preferred Votes	Increase	Aggregate Preference Split (b)
1984				
ALP	47.5	51.8	4.3	57.3
Coalition	45.0	48.2	3.2	42.7
1987				
ALP	45.8	50.8	5.0	61.7
Coalition	46.1	49.2	3.1	38.3
1990				
ALP	39.4	49.9	10.5	61.0
Coalition	43.4	50.1	6.7	39.0
1993				
ALP	44.9	51.4	6.5	60.2
Coalition	44.3	48.6	4.3	39.8
1996				
ALP	38.8	46.4	7.6	54.3
Coalition	47.2	53.6	6.4	45.7
1998				
ALP	40.1	51.0	10.9	53.4
Coalition	39.5	49.0	9.5	46.6
2001				
ALP	37.8	49.0	11.2	58.3
Coalition	43.0	51.0	8.0	41.7

(a) For Coalition, aggregate of Liberal and National Parties.

(b) Percentage share of total increase between first preference and two-party preferred votes.

independent preferences overall in recent elections, what has not been clear is the support the major parties received from individual minor parties and independents.

The question of preferences received prominence in the 2001 election due to the preference decisions of some parties. The Australian Democrats abandoned their 'split ticket' approach and decided to direct preferences in a significant way for the first time. The Greens directed preferences to the ALP in 110 divisions, including all marginal seats. One Nation

decided to place sitting members last in most seats in Queensland while generally putting the Liberal Party before Labor elsewhere.

Table 3 shows, for each party contesting the 2001 House of Representatives election, the number of first preference votes the party received and the percentage of those votes that flowed to the Labor Party and to the Coalition when the party's preferences were distributed. All parties and independent candidates whose preferences were distributed are included in the table except for those in Divisions where

there was not an ALP/Coalition final contest.

While the data in the table generally confirms conventional wisdom regarding the direction of minor party preferences, some interesting trends emerge. Of note is the relatively high percentage of Australian Democrat preferences flowing to the ALP (64 per cent).

Directing Preferences

While parties may try to influence the preference decisions of their supporters, there is never any guarantee that the voters will follow the party's directions. The following analysis attempts to measure the success of the Australian Democrats and the Greens in directing preferences at the 2001 election. One Nation has been excluded as definitive information about their preference decisions is not available.

The Australian Democrats directed preferences to the ALP in 15 divisions and to the Coalition in 10 divisions. In divisions where preferences were directed to the ALP, its share of Democrat preferences was 6 percentage points higher than divisions where no direction was given, while in divisions where preferences were directed to the Coalition its share of Democrat preferences was 7.5 percentage points higher.

For the Greens, in divisions where preferences were directed to the ALP, its share of Green preferences was 3.5 percentage points higher than in divisions where no direction was given.

The above suggests that the Australian Democrats, and to a lesser extent the Greens, had a degree of success in directing preferences to the ALP. However, if the effect of the preference decisions of the Australian Democrats and the Greens was as estimated above, then it is worth noting that no results were affected by those decisions.

Table 3 Final Destination Preferences 2001 Election

Party	Votes	ALP	LP/NP
		%	%
Liberal Party	24 822	12.31	87.69
National Party	50 207	12.65	87.35
Australian Democrats	611 209	64.13	35.87
The Greens	558 345	74.83	25.17
Pauline Hanson's One Nation	478 220	44.13	55.87
Christian Democratic Party	69 163	29.48	70.52
Unity	24 633	68.24	31.76
Citizens Electoral Council	17 801	42.85	57.15
liberals for forests	16 034	20.91	79.09
No GST Party	13 703	61.90	38.10
Australians Against Further Immigration	11 961	41.51	58.49
Save the ADI Site Party	6 029	59.94	40.06
Progressive Labour Party	4 467	59.55	40.45
Lower Excise Fuel and Beer Party	4 294	51.19	48.81
Help End Marijuana Prohibition	3 277	67.59	32.41
Curtin Labor Alliance	2 466	59.57	40.43
Non-Custodial Parents Party	769	51.37	48.63
The Fishing Party	720	58.89	41.11
Tasmania First Party	615	56.75	43.25
Outdoor Recreation Party	485	42.68	57.32
Others	194 372	51.59	48.41
Total	2 093 592	57.29	42.71

Note: Excludes votes in Calare, Farrer, Kennedy, New England and Warringah where there was no two-party (ALP Coalition) result.