

# Australian political opinion: from the 2019 election to COVID-19

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In this paper we will cover 3 main topics. First, we examine the results of the 2019 federal election and discuss the 2 major issues that determined the outcome of that election, namely, policies on taxation and factors associated with leadership. Second, we provide an overview of long term trends in electoral behaviour, and how these trends may affect elections in the future. Finally, we look at the political implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before we turn to these topics, some background about the Australian Election Study (AES) survey itself. We have been conducting the AES since 1987, completing 12 surveys after each federal election. We typically ask about 250 questions of each survey respondent; about 90 questions are ones that we ask consistently from election to election. We have therefore accumulated a huge amount of information about why people voted in each election, what they thought was important, and much else besides. This unrivalled database allows us to trace long term trends in electoral behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

The survey we conducted in 2019 went into the field immediately after the election in May and it was in the field until September.<sup>2</sup> We surveyed just over 2,000 respondents nationally, with a response rate of 42%. More information and interactive charts are available at [www.australianelectionstudy.org](http://www.australianelectionstudy.org).

## The 2019 election

### The economy and taxation

Since 1996 the AES has consistently asked voters what they considered to be the most important factor that shaped their vote. From Figure 1 it is apparent that consistently across all that time period, policies are what determined a person's vote. There is a spike in 1998; this was the election in which the goods and services tax that the Liberal Party proposed was

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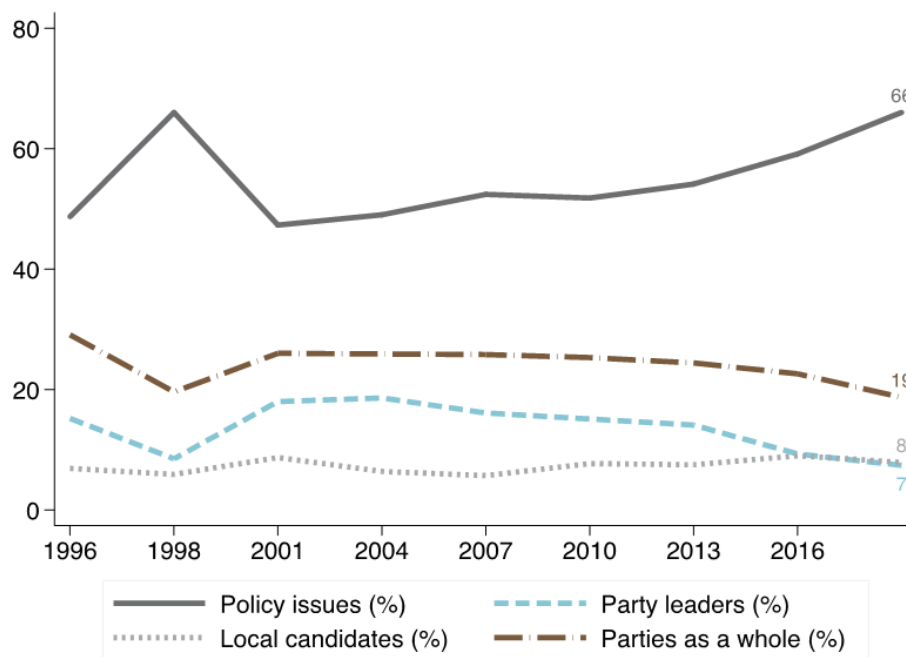
\* This paper was presented as part of the Senate Lecture Series on 12 February 2021. For results from the 2022 federal election, see Sarah Cameron, Ian McAllister, Simon Jackson, Jill Sheppard, [The 2022 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study](#), Canberra, Australian National University, 2022.

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, [Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study 1987–2022](#), Australian National University, Canberra, 2022; Ian McAllister, *The Australian Voter: Fifty Years of Change*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Ian McAllister, Jill Sheppard, Clive Bean, Rachel Gibson, Toni Makkai, Sarah Cameron, *Australian Election Study 2019* [computer file], December 2019.

the major election issue. The importance of policies then declined somewhat in 2001, but it has been consistently increasing ever since. In 2019 a total of 66% of the AES respondents said that policies were the major factor which affected how they voted; this is similar to the proportion in 1998.<sup>3</sup> Aside from policies, about one in 5 people say that it is the political parties that determine how they vote. These considerations relate to whether the political parties are seen as divided or united, as well as to leadership and party loyalties. At the other end of the scale less than one in 10 mention the party leaders or the local party candidates as determining how they vote.

**Figure 1: Considerations in the voting decision**



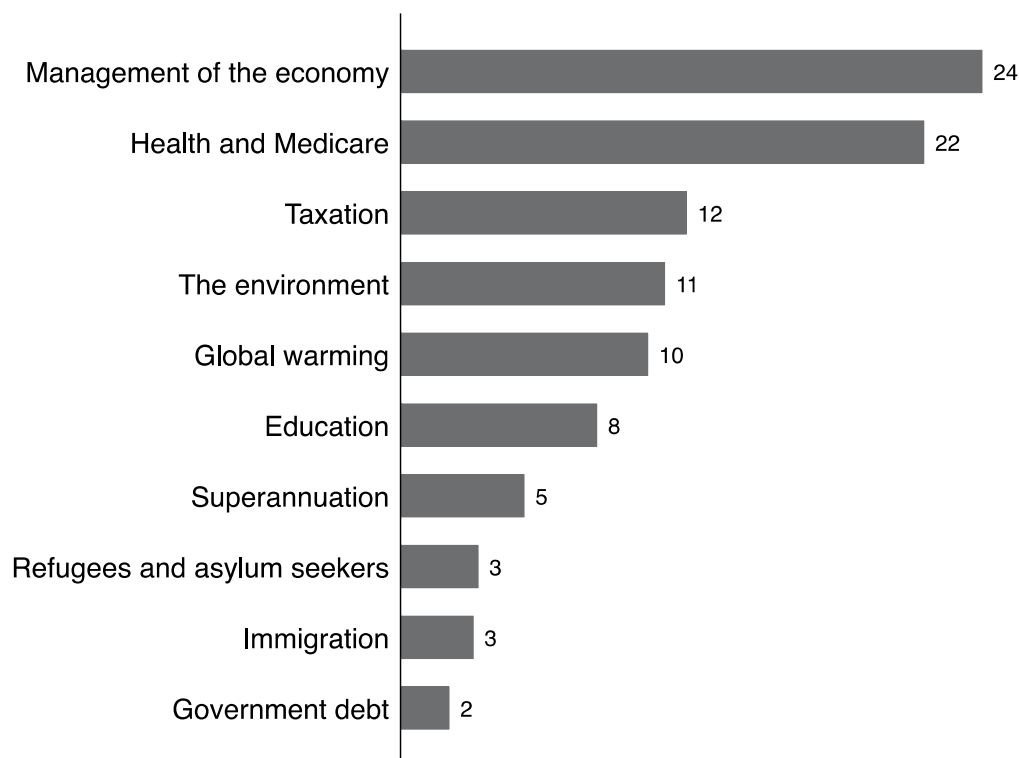
*Note: Estimates are percentages. Question asked, 'in deciding how you would vote in the election, which was most important to you'?*<sup>4</sup>

The AES also consistently asks people what they considered to be the most important election issues. Figure 2 shows the proportion of respondents who chose one of 10 issues as being their first most important. We find that the major issues that determine how people vote tend to be economic management, health, and education. The 2019 election was very similar to previous elections in that economic management and health were the 2 top issues. Although there were slight differences, the results in Figure 2 show that education declined to the last half of those issues. Similarly, 11% of people mentioned the environment as their most important issue, and another 10% mentioned global warming. If these 2 issues are added together, it means that the environment, broadly defined, was one of the top 3 election issues.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, 'Policies and performance in the 2019 Australian federal election', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 55, issue 3, 2020, pp. 239–256.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 7.

Figure 2: Most important election issues

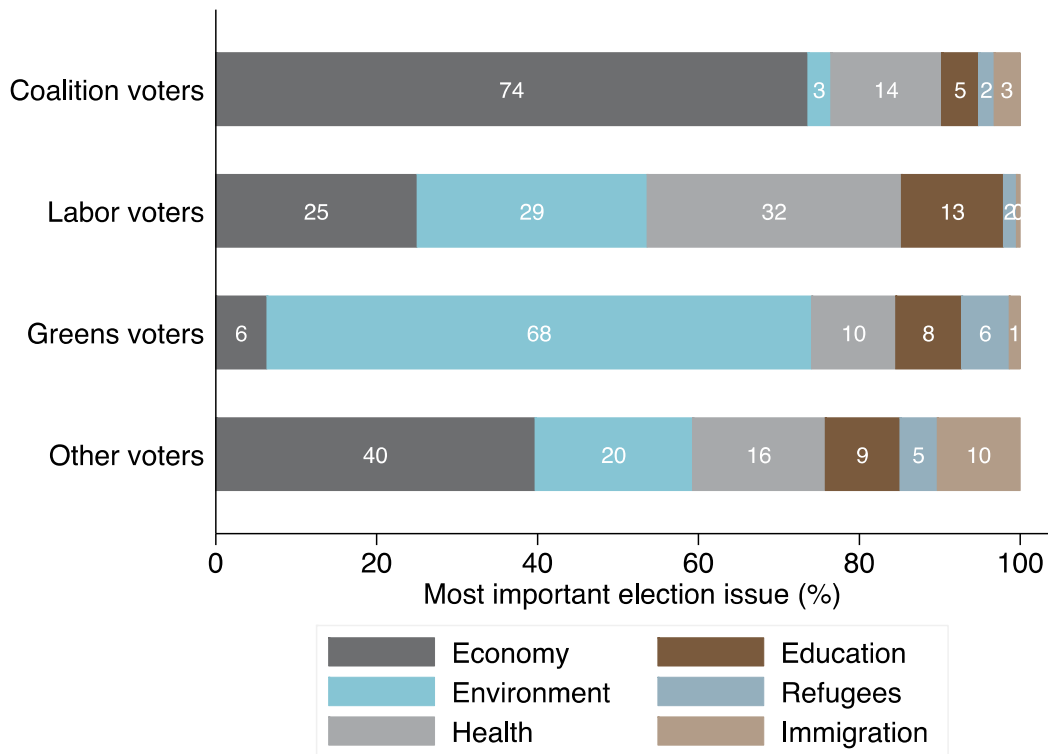


*Note: Estimates are percentages. Question asked, '...which of these issues was the most important to you and your family during the election campaign?'*<sup>5</sup>

In terms of how the party voters viewed these issues, Figure 3 shows that 3 in 4 Coalition voters thought that economic issues were the most important in the election. Labor voters, by contrast, were more diverse in the issues that they selected, covering health, the environment and the economy. Perhaps not surprisingly, two-thirds of Greens voters identified the environment as being the issue that they considered most important in the election.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 7.

Figure 3: Most important election issues by vote

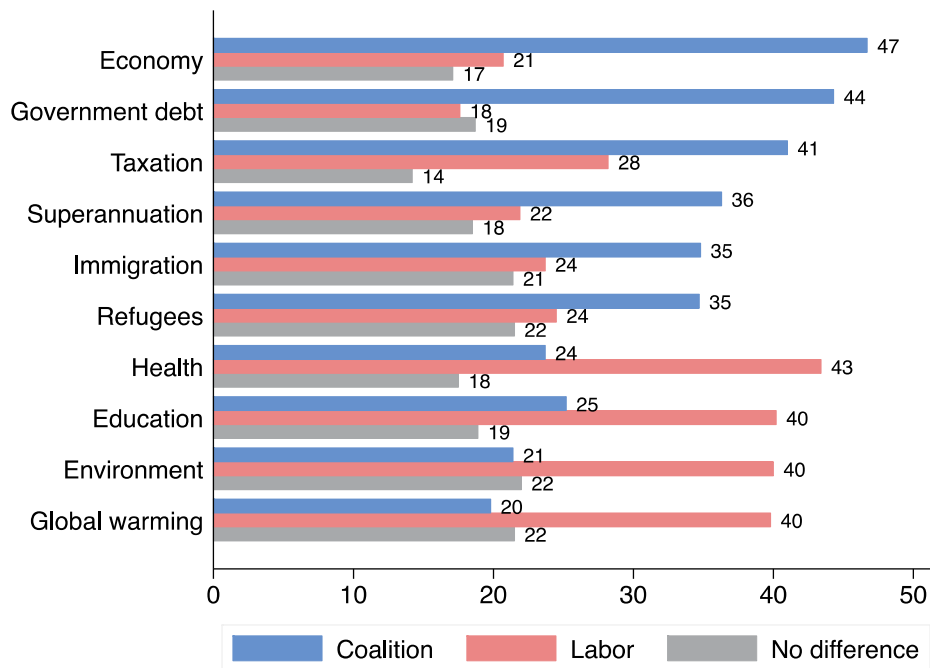


Note: Estimates show the percentage of respondents who indicated each issue was the most important in the 2019 election by first preference vote in the House of Representatives. Environment combines 'the environment' and 'global warming'. Economy combines 'management of the economy', 'taxation', 'superannuation' and 'government debt'.<sup>6</sup>

We also ask voters which of the 2 major parties they prefer to manage these various issues (Figure 4). This shows a consistent pattern where the Coalition has an advantage on economic issues. For example, the Coalition has a substantial advantage over Labor as the preferred party on the economy and government debt, as well as on taxation. At the other end of the scale, Labor has a very strong advantage over the Coalition on issues such as health, education, the environment and global warming. On superannuation, the Coalition has an advantage over Labor of 14 percentage points. However, going back to 2016 the Coalition had put forward a series of policies to restrict superannuation and the amount that people could contribute. When we asked that same question in 2016 voters saw no difference between the 2 major parties. In 2019 the Coalition advantage opened out on the issue significantly.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 8.

Figure 4: Preferred party policies



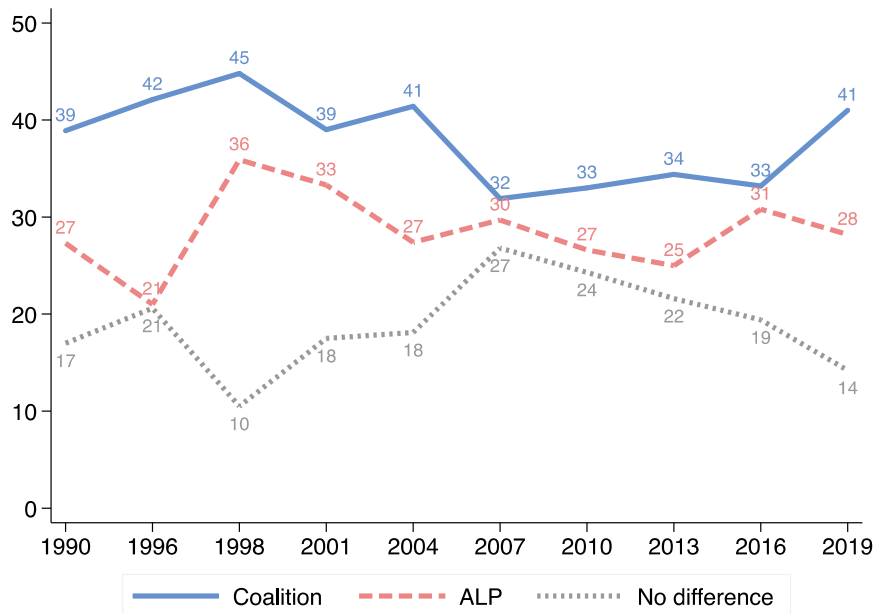
Note: Estimates are percentages. Question asked, '...whose policies – the Labor Party's or the Liberal-National Coalition's – would you say come closer to your own views on each of these issues?'

The central economic issue in the election was taxation, and Labor proposed a series of significant policy changes. Labor argued that there should be major tax changes to dividends and tax imputation, as well as changes to the taxation of investment properties through capital gains tax and negative gearing. The AES asked the voters their views on these tax changes, and the respondents were very divided on them.<sup>8</sup> Slightly more thought it was a good policy, slightly less thought it was a bad policy. The net effect, as Figure 5 shows, is that there was a major division between the 2 major parties on the issue of taxation. The Coalition had a significant advantage as the party most able to handle the issue. If we compare that to 2016 there was only a 2 percentage point gap between the 2 major parties; in 2019 that opened out significantly to a 13 percentage point difference. The other interesting part of Figure 5 is the proportion of voters who thought there was no major difference between the parties in 2019; at 14% this was the second lowest figure since 1990, the other one being the 1998 election, which was the election fought on the issue of the introduction of a goods and services tax.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, pp. 8–9.

Figure 5: Preferred party policy on taxation



Note: Estimates are percentages. Question asked, '...whose policies – the Labor Party's or the Liberal-National Coalition's – would you say come closer to your own views on each of these issues? Taxation.'<sup>9</sup>

Labor's economic policies in the election were predicated on the idea that asset ownership was concentrated among relatively small groups of voters who were affluent and able to pay the extra tax that was being proposed. What our research shows, is that this was not necessarily the case. While some voters are affluent and would not have been unduly affected by the tax changes, other asset owners were not particularly well-off. This latter group are using investment properties and share portfolios in order to provide an income in retirement or to build up superannuation.<sup>10</sup>

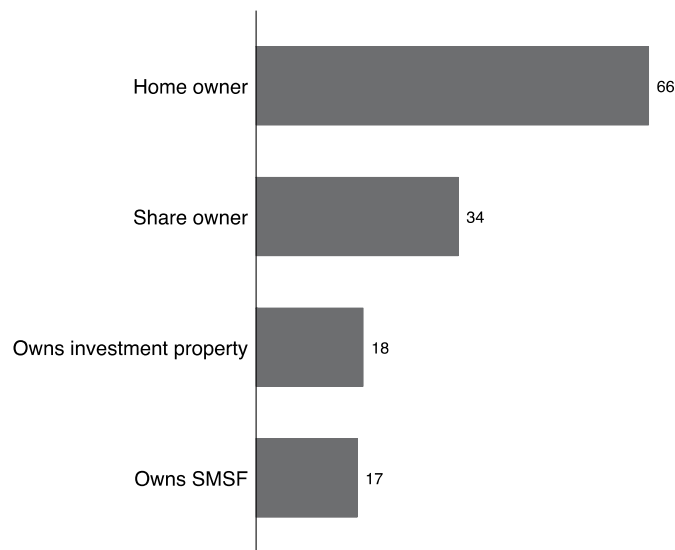
A major change that we have observed in the electorate over the last 20 years is a significant increase in asset ownership across the electorate. Figure 6 shows that two-thirds of people say that they are homeowners, evenly divided between those who own their properties outright and those who are paying them off. This represents a slight decline over the last 20 years or so, largely caused by younger people not being able to enter the housing market because of the cost of property.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Hellwig and Ian McAllister, 'The impact of economic assets on party choice in Australia', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, vol. 28, issue 4, 2018, pp. 516–534.

<sup>11</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Home ownership and housing tenure*, 5 April 2023 (accessed 8 May 2023).

Figure 6: Asset ownership across the electorate



*Note: Estimates are percentages. Questions asked: 'do you own outright, or are you buying or renting the dwelling in which you now live?'; 'do you own shares in any company listed on the Australian Stock Exchange?'; 'do you own any investment properties?'; 'do you have a self-managed superannuation fund?'*<sup>12</sup>

The second bar in Figure 6 shows that around one in 3 directly own shares on the Australian Stock Exchange.<sup>13</sup> That is also a decline, because it was around 20 percentage points higher in the early 2000s when there was the privatisation of Qantas, CSL (Commonwealth Serum Laboratories), Commonwealth Bank, and other government-owned entities. There was a significant decline in share ownership after the global financial crisis. But even with 34% of the AES respondents saying they directly own shares, this represents one of the largest proportions of direct share ownership in the world, more than the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and Canada.

The final assets in Figure 6 are ownership of an investment property and a self-managed superannuation fund; in each case about one in 5 people said that they owned such an asset. This estimate is higher than the proportion reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).<sup>14</sup> The reason for this discrepancy is that the ABS uses a strict legal definition of asset ownership, while the AES question identifies people within the household. For example, there could be a household of 4 or 5 people but only one or 2 people might technically own that asset. However, the taxation applied to the asset will affect the income of the total household. We believe that this was one of the key mistakes in Labor's policy towards superannuation and property investment. The proposed changes would have affected a larger proportion of people than Labor assumed. For example, the AES finds that 3 in 4 voters own at least one of these assets. When we compare voting between 2016 and 2019, we find that 19% more Coalition votes in 2019 came from people who owned self-managed superannuation funds compared to the previous election. So, there was a

<sup>12</sup> Ian McAllister, Jill Sheppard, Clive Bean, Rachel Gibson, Toni Makkai, Sarah Cameron, *Australian Election Study 2019* [computer file], December 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Ian, McAllister and Toni Makkai, 'The decline and rise of class voting? From occupation to culture in Australia', *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55, issue 3, 2018, pp. 426–445.

<sup>14</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Housing Occupancy and Costs*, 25 May 2022 (accessed 8 May 2023).

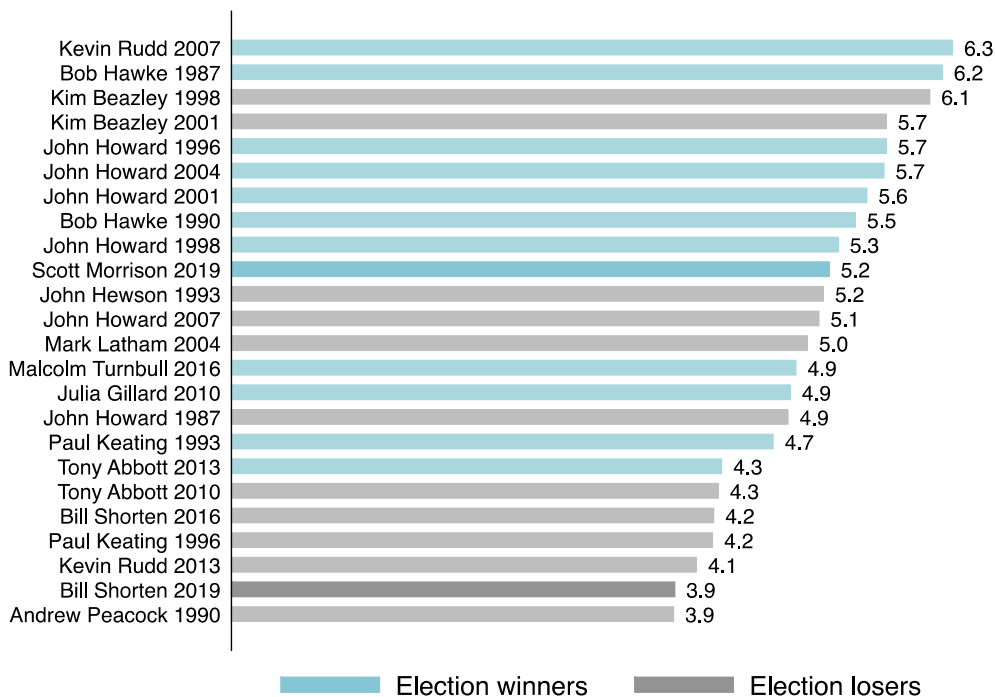
significant movement in votes between those 2 elections, with a shift of about 8% towards the Coalition among investment property owners alone.<sup>15</sup>

### Leadership

Apart from taxation and economic policy, the other factor that emerged in the election as important was leadership. Two aspects of leadership were important. One was the relative unpopularity of Bill Shorten as Labor leader, while the second was the fourth change of prime minister outside of an election in the space of 8 years, from Malcolm Turnbull to Scott Morrison. What we find from the data is that Bill Shorten’s unpopularity was a factor that harmed Labor, while the change in prime minister was relatively unimportant.

To place leadership popularity in long term perspective, the AES consistently asks the respondents to rate the party leaders on a scale from zero to 10. Figure 7 shows the figures for all of the major party leaders from 1987 through to 2019. The figures at the end of the bars are the mean value of the score from zero to 10. At the top are the most popular leaders over the past 30 or so years; these include Kevin Rudd in 2007 and Bob Hawke in 1987. Bob Hawke was probably even more popular in 1983 but we lack earlier comparable data. At the bottom of Figure 7, Bill Shorten is the least popular leader over the period, with the exception of Andrew Peacock in 1990. Shorten was also relatively unpopular in 2016.

Figure 7: Leader popularity 1987-2019



Note: Estimates are means. The scale runs from 0 (strongly dislike politician) to 10 (strongly like politician) with a designated midpoint of 5 (neither like nor dislike).<sup>16</sup>

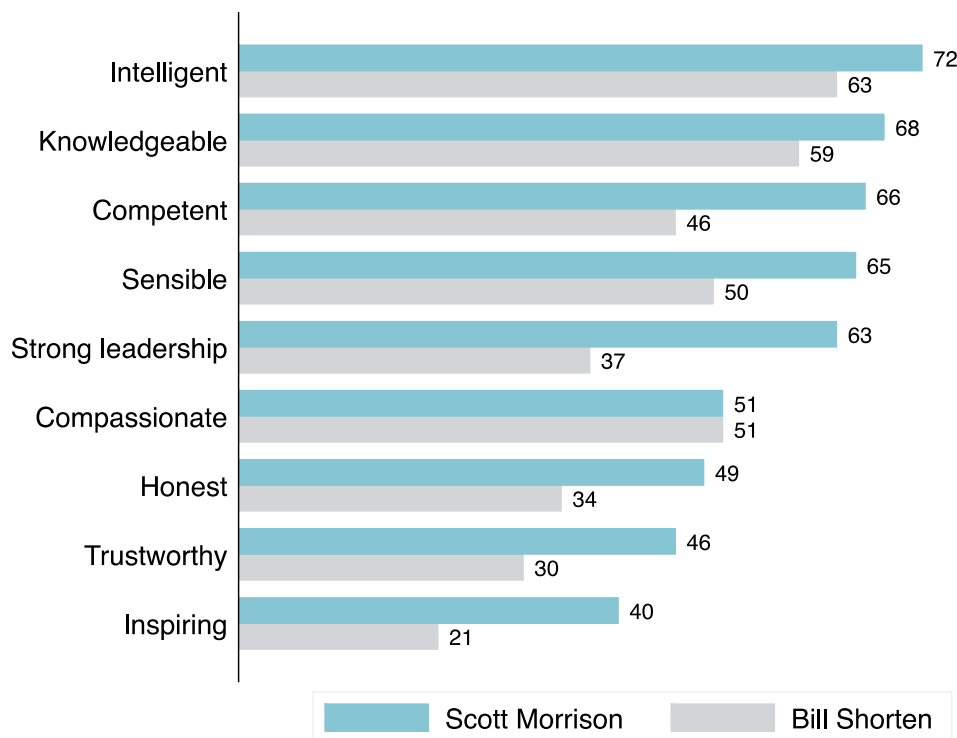
<sup>15</sup> Timothy Hellwig and Ian McAllister, 'Party Positions, Asset Ownership and Economic Voting', *Political Studies*, vol. 67, issue 4, pp. 912–931.

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 12.



Leadership is electorally significant because there is a large body of research which looks at how voters evaluate leaders based on their qualities.<sup>17</sup> The AES consistently asks a question about how appropriately 9 particular qualities apply to the various leaders. Figure 8 shows that Scott Morrison led Bill Shorten on all of these 9 characteristics, with the exception of compassion, where they are rated equally. The research in Australia and internationally shows that the most important quality that voters look for is integrity; in practice voters are seeking leaders who are honest and trustworthy.<sup>18</sup> Voters also want to see leaders who exhibit leadership, as reflected in strength and inspiration. From the characteristics in Figure 8 it is clear that Bill Shorten fell very far behind Scott Morrison on these qualities.

**Figure 8: Leader characteristics**



*Note: Question asked, '[Thinking first about Scott Morrison/now thinking about Bill Shorten], in your opinion how well does each of these describe him – extremely well, quite well, not too well or not well at all?' Estimates combine the percentage who responded that the characteristic described the leader 'extremely well' or 'quite well'.<sup>19</sup>*

Leadership played out in the election in that only about 4% of Labor voters said they were motivated by leadership in the election (Figure 9). If we compare the trend back to 2007, around 20% of Labor voters said they were motivated by leadership, when the highly popular Kevin Rudd led Labor. Even in 2010 and 2013 the results show that leadership figured significantly for Labor voters. Liberal voters were more motivated by leadership in 2016 and

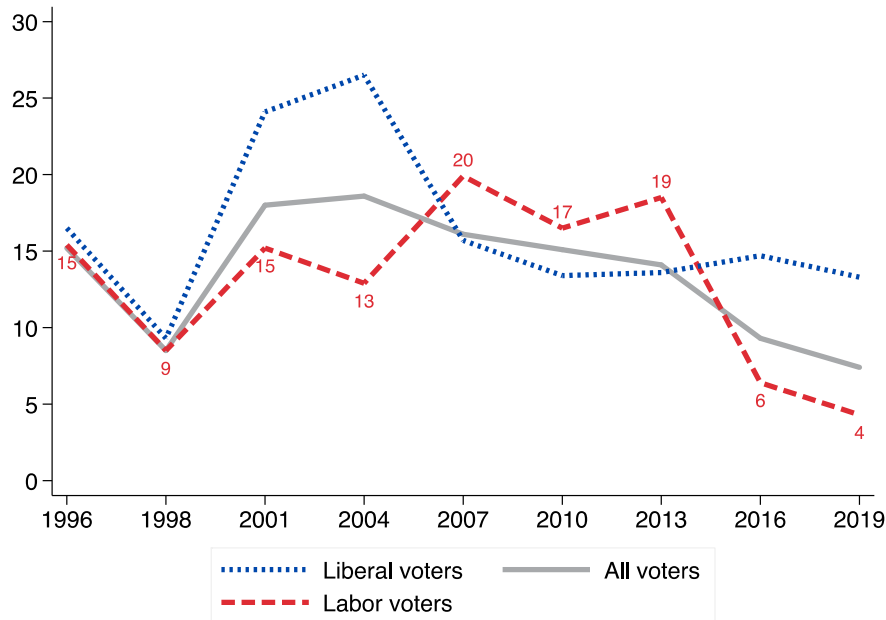
<sup>17</sup> Ian McAllister, 'The Personalization of Politics in Australia', *Party Politics*, vol. 21, issue 3, pp. 337–345; Stephen Quinlan and Ian McAllister, 'Leader or Party? Quantifying and Testing Behavioral Personalization 1996–2017', *Party Politics*, vol. 28, issue 1, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Dieter Ohr and Henrik Oscarsson, 'Leader Traits, Leader Image, and Vote Choice', in Kees Aarts, André Blais and Hermann Schmitt (eds), *Political Leaders and Democratic Elections*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 12.

2019 than Labor voters, but again if we look back to 2001 and 2004, the heyday of the Howard Coalition government, it is clear that leadership was much more important at that time.

Figure 9: Voting based on the party leaders

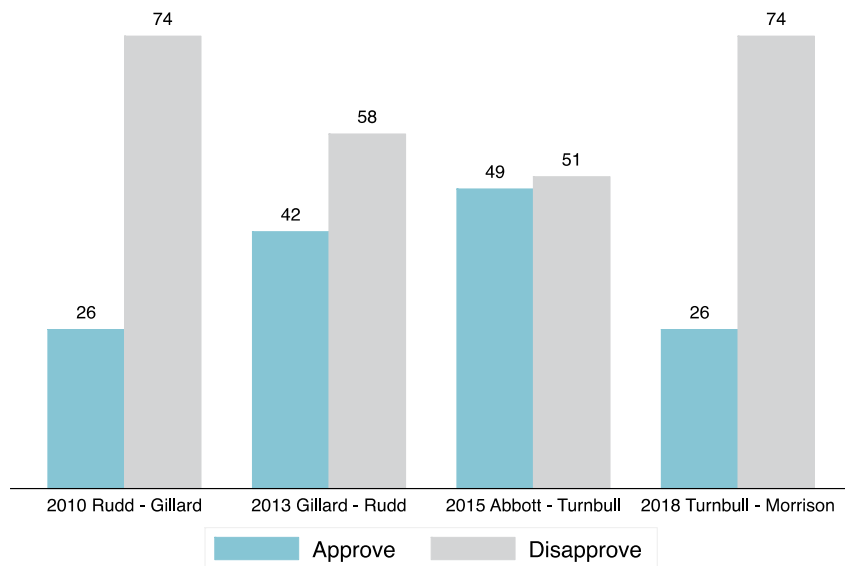


Note: Estimates show the percentage of voters who indicated that party leadership was the most important factor in deciding how they would vote. Question asked, 'in deciding how you would vote in the election, which was most important to you?' [the party leaders / the policy issues / the candidates in your electorate / the parties taken as a whole].<sup>20</sup>

The other aspect of leadership is the consistent changes in prime minister, 4 of them occurring outside of elections since 2010. Each of the AES surveys has asked the respondents what they thought of these leadership changes. It is clear from Figure 10 that for the most part voters were not impressed. They particularly disliked the change from Rudd to Gillard in 2010. They also disapproved of the change from Turnbull to Morrison in 2018. The remaining 2 changes are more ambiguous, but in each case there was a majority who disapproved of it.

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 11.

Figure 10: Attitudes towards the leadership changes



Note: Estimates are percentages. Figure shows approval/disapproval of the way the party (Labor in 2010 and 2013, Liberal in 2015 and 2018) handled the leadership changes in: 2010 when Julia Gillard replaced Kevin Rudd; 2013 when Kevin Rudd replaced Julia Gillard; 2015 when Malcolm Turnbull replaced Tony Abbott; and 2018 when Scott Morrison replaced Malcolm Turnbull.<sup>21</sup>

The 2019 AES survey asked the respondents if they would have changed their vote if Malcolm Turnbull had remained Liberal leader. These results show that while there would have been an exodus of voters from the Liberal Party, it is almost exactly matched by voters who would have been attracted to the Liberals. In effect, the fourth change in prime minister, from Turnbull to Morrison, did not affect the outcome of the election.

## A divided electorate?

The 2019 election can be situated in the context of long-term trends in Australian political behaviour and attitudes. Following the 2019 election result, which few expected, there was commentary about the existence of ‘two Australias’—an increasingly divided electorate contributing to the unexpected outcome.<sup>22</sup> The AES data allows us to unpack some of the longer-term divisions that have emerged in the electorate, how they fed into the election result, and what this means for the trajectory of democratic politics in Australia.

## Gender

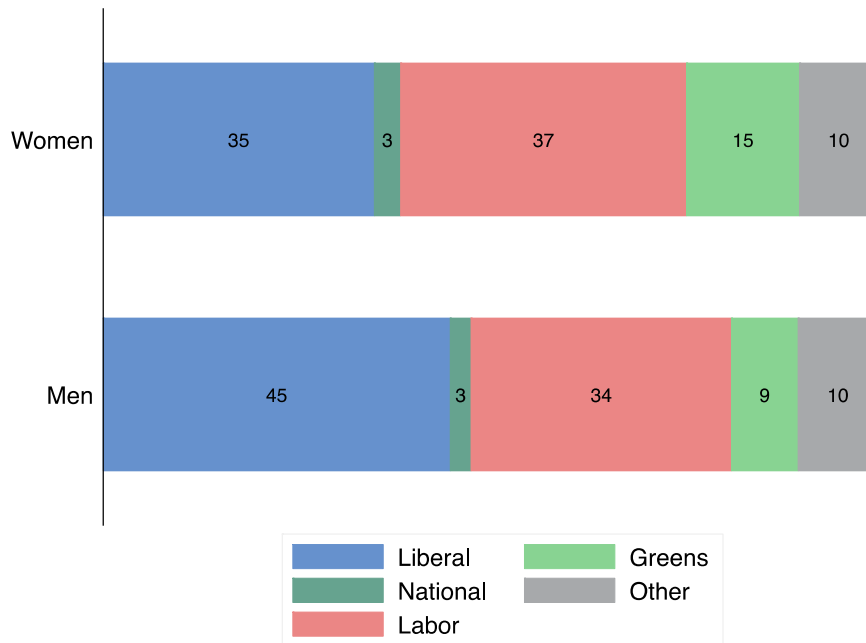
Starting with gender differences, in 2019 there was a substantial gender voting gap as shown in Figure 11. Ten per cent more men than women voted for the Coalition, and the Greens attracted a good deal more support among women compared to men. Placing the gender gap seen in 2019 in long-term perspective shows that this was not the usual state of affairs.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 13; Ian McAllister, *ANU Poll 2013: Electoral Reform*, ADA Dataverse, V1, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Matt Wade, ‘We have two Australias’: Election results show a growing divide within the nation’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 May 2019.

Figure 12 shows that the gender gap in voting behaviour has actually reversed over time. In the 1990s women were slightly more likely to vote for the Liberal Party, and men were more likely to vote Labor. Over time this has gradually reversed so that women now prefer Labor and men prefer the Liberals. In 2019 there was the biggest gender gap in voting behaviour on record.

**Figure 11: Gender and vote choice**



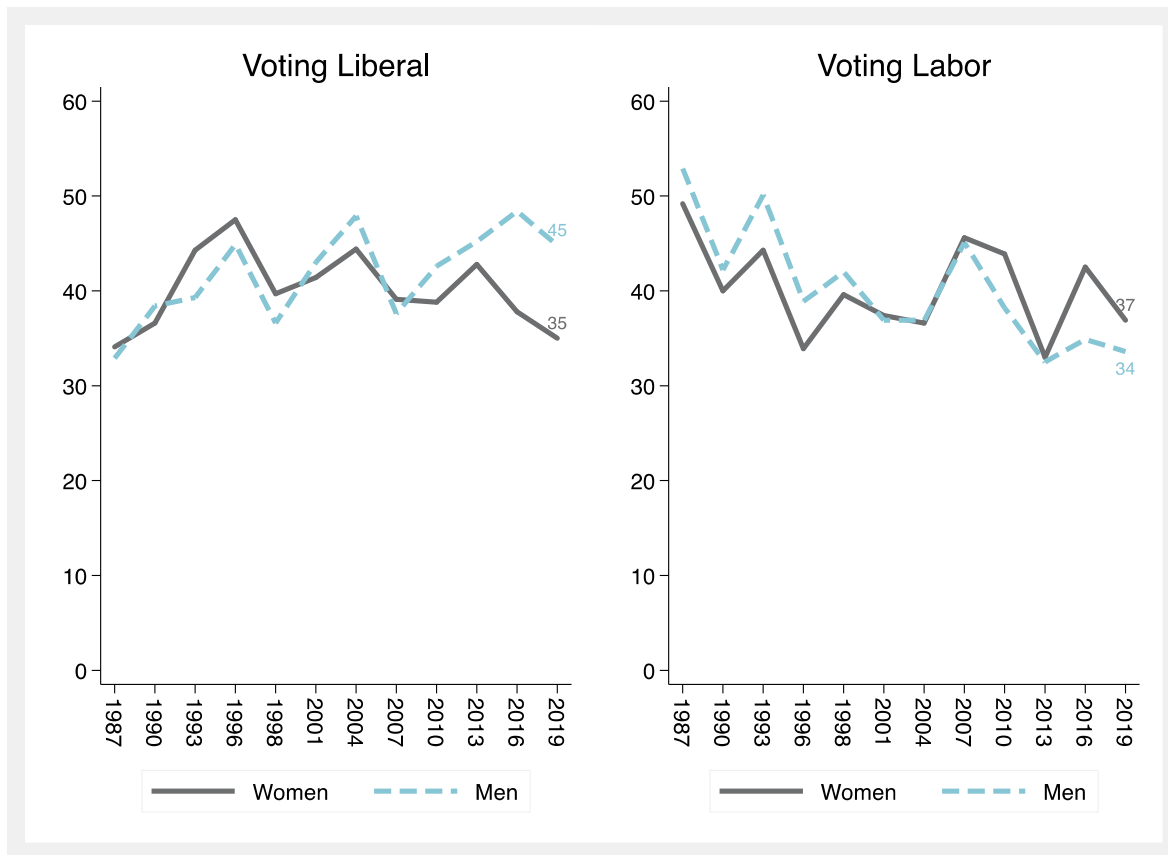
*Note: Estimates are the percentage of first preference votes in the House of Representatives.<sup>23</sup>*

There are a number of factors underpinning this transformation of gender and voting in Australia. This includes tremendous societal changes that have taken place over this time. An increasing proportion of women undertake higher education, which is associated with greater support for parties on the left. Moreover, women have greater representation in the labour force and as union members.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), *LFS by sex and age – indicators*, 2021 (accessed 8 May 2023); Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *Australian Election Study Interactive Data*, edited by Australian Election Study, 2020.

Figure 12: Gender differences in voting for the Liberal and Labor parties



Note: Estimates are the percentage of first preference votes in the House of Representatives.<sup>25</sup>

Changes within Australia's major political parties have also contributed to this shift in gendered voting patterns. Back in the early 1990s women were similarly underrepresented in both the major parties. Just 13% of parliamentarians in 1990 were women.<sup>26</sup> Since then, Labor has dramatically increased their proportion of women in Parliament, to 47%, through introducing voluntary party quotas.<sup>27</sup> The Liberal Party on the other hand has made slower progress, with just 23% of Liberals in federal parliament being women.<sup>28</sup> There has also been a shift in parties' issue priorities over time. In particular, Labor has shifted from a focus on working class issues to incorporate a broader set of priorities including progressive social issues. So, there are factors contributing to the gender gap both within the electorate and within political parties. This reversal of the gender gap is not unique to Australia – it has been observed in other democracies including in Europe and North America.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Joy McCann, and Janet Wilson, '[Representation of women in Australian parliaments 2014](#)', *Research Paper*, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 9 July 2011, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> Katrine Beauregard, 'Partisanship and the gender gap: support for gender quotas in Australia', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 53, issue 3, 2018, pp. 290–319.

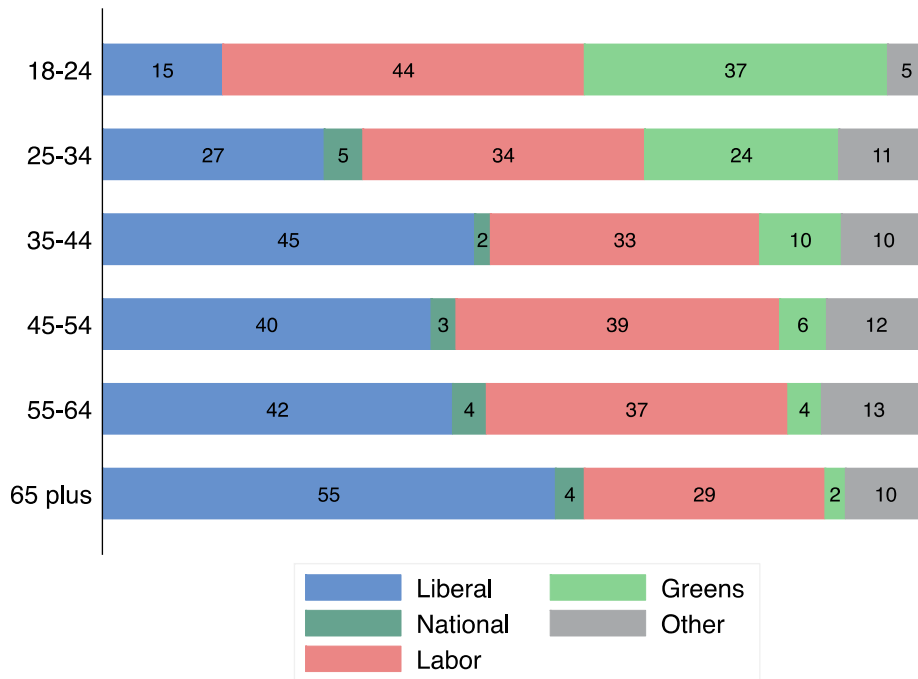
<sup>28</sup> Jane Norman, '[Women still underrepresented in Parliament after 2019 federal election](#)', *ABC News*, 27 May 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Simone Abendschön and Stephanie Steinmetz, 'The Gender Gap in Voting Revisited: Women's Party Preferences in a European Context', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, vol. 21, issue 2, 2014, pp. 315–344.

### Age and Generation

The AES data also shows generational differences in political attitudes and behaviour. Younger Australians are primarily voting for Labor and the Greens, while a majority of those over 65 are voting for the Coalition as shown in Figure 13. The Greens have a lot of support amongst younger Australians, while older Australians are primarily casting their ballots for the major parties.

Figure 13: Age and vote choice

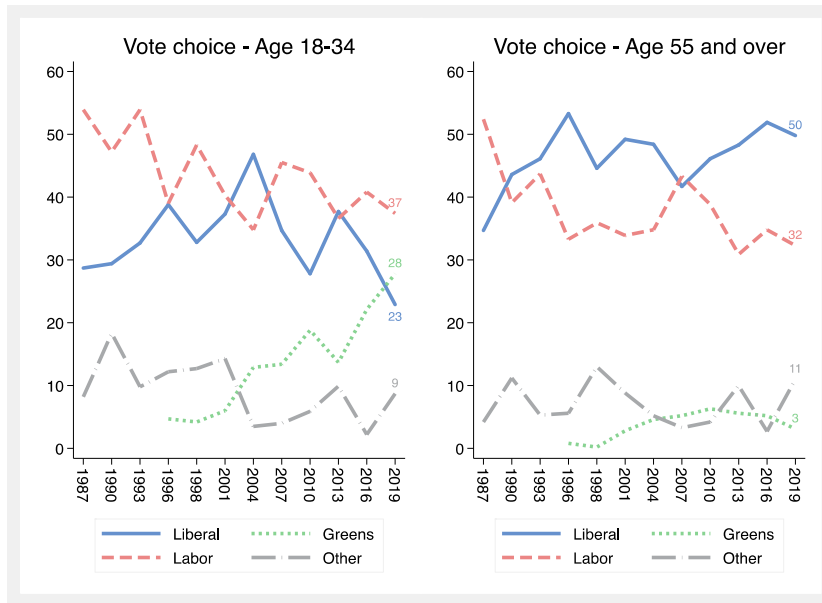


Note: Estimates are the percentage of first preference votes in the House of Representatives.<sup>30</sup>

We can look at the trends over time to see whether this age gap is unique to the 2019 election or a continuation of what has happened in the past. What the results in Figure 14 show is that younger Australians have always been further to the left of older Australians, although the division is growing over time. The current generation of young people are much less likely to vote for the Liberal Party compared to previous generations when they were young. The gap between the voting behaviour of younger and older Australians was greater in 2019 than at any other time on record. The AES surveys have typically shown that as voters get older they shift further to the right in their political preferences. As Millennials and Generation Z are further to the left to begin with, this has potential long-term ramifications for the preferences of Australian voters, as these generations get older.

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 18.

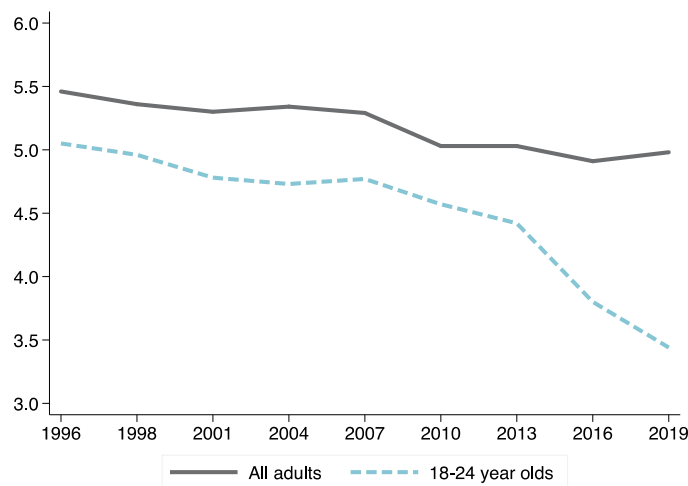
Figure 14: Age differences in voting behaviour



Note: Estimates are the percentage of first preference votes in the House of Representatives.<sup>31</sup>

The generational divide is also evident in where Australians' place themselves ideologically from left to right. Figure 15 shows the average placement of voters on a left-right scale from zero to 10. This shows that the electorate as a whole has been gradually shifting to the left over time. Young people have consistently been further to the left of the electorate as a whole, although there are further indications of generational change in ideology, with the current generation of younger Australians moving a lot further to the political left.

Figure 15: Left-right ideology



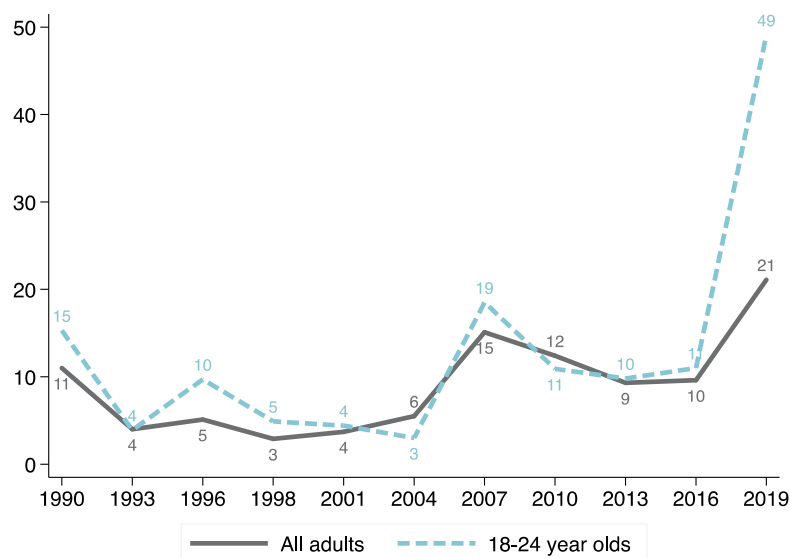
Note: Estimates are means. Question asks, 'in politics, people sometimes talk about the 'left' and the 'right'. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?'<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Roger Jones, David Gow, Ian McAllister, *Australian Election Study 1996* [computer file], June 1996; Clive Bean, David Gow, Ian McAllister, *Australian Election Study 1998* [computer file], January 1999; Clive Bean, David Gow, Ian McAllister,

In the lead up to the 2019 election there was discussion about it being a ‘climate change election’.<sup>33</sup> Examining attitudes on climate change shows further evidence of generational change on this issue. Although Labor, the preferred party on environmental issues, lost the election – there is some support for the idea that 2019 was a climate election. Figure 16 shows that one in 5 voters identified the environment or climate change as their top issue priority in the election. This is a greater proportion than at any other time on record. Young people in particular saw environmental issues as important – around half identified the environment or global warming as the most important election issue. This heightened concern about climate change took place in the context of a wave of global climate change protests in 2019, including in Australia, led by young people.

Figure 16: The environment and global warming as most important election issues



Note: Estimates show the percentage of respondents who indicated the environment or global warming was the most important election issue. Question asked, ‘...which of these issues was the most important to you and your family during the election campaign?’<sup>34</sup>

## Social class

Scott Morrison declared the 2019 election a victory for the so-called ‘quiet Australians’ a somewhat ill-defined group that has been compared to John Howard’s battlers.<sup>35</sup> A question frequently raised in these discussions, is whether the working class, traditionally considered Labor voters, are shifting their votes to the Coalition. The AES data provides a number of

*Australian Election Study 2001* [computer file], April 2002; Clive Bean, Ian McAllister, Rachel Gibson, David Gow, *Australian Election Study 2004* [computer file], March 2005; Clive Bean, Ian McAllister, David Gow, *Australian Election Study 2007* [computer file], May 2008; Ian McAllister, Clive Bean, Rachel Gibson, Juliet Pietsch, *Australian Election Study 2010* [computer file], May 2011; Ian McAllister, Juliet Pietsch, Clive Bean, Rachel Gibson, *Australian Election Study 2013* [computer file], January 2014; Ian McAllister, Juliet Pietsch, Clive Bean, Rachel Gibson, Toni Makkai, *Australian Election Study 2016* [computer file], February 2017; Ian McAllister, Jill Sheppard, Clive Bean, Rachel Gibson, Toni Makkai, Sarah Cameron, *Australian Election Study 2019* [computer file], December 2019 (*Australian Election Study 1996–2019*).

<sup>33</sup> Adam Morton, ‘[The climate change election: where do the parties stand on the environment?](#)’, *The Guardian*, 12 May 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Ian McAllister, Roger Jones, David Gow, *Australian Election Study 1990* [computer file], November 1990; Roger, Jones, Ian McAllister, David Denemark, David, Gow, *Australian Election Study 1993* [computer file], August 1993; and *Australian Election Study 1996–2019* (refer to footnote 33).

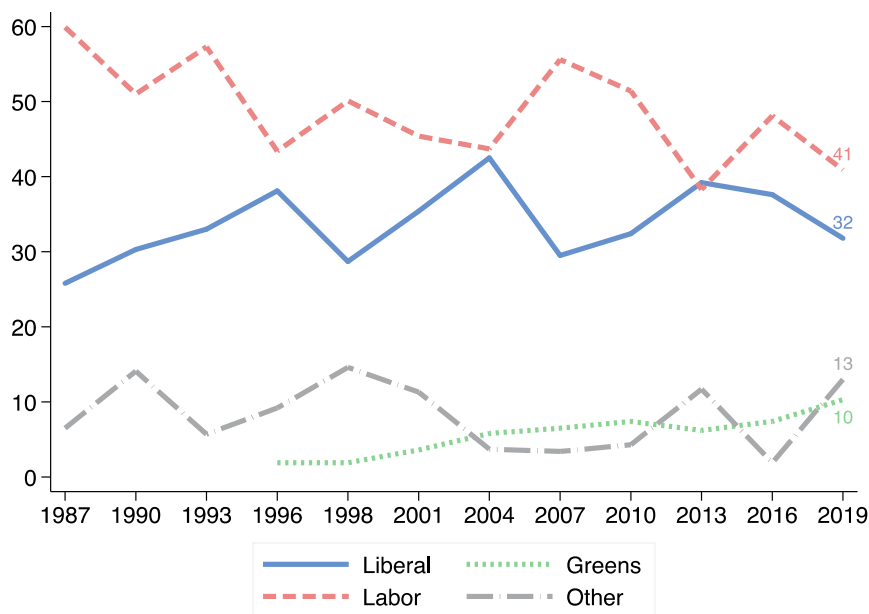
<sup>35</sup> Laura Tingle and Laura Francis, ‘[Quiet Australians evaluate Scott Morrison’s Government six months after election victory](#)’, *ABC News*, 14 November 2019.



ways to look at the voting behaviour of different social classes, although understanding social class is not so straightforward. Previous understandings of class based on occupation no longer reflect the complexities of social class in modern Australia, with the increasing importance of asset ownership.<sup>36</sup>

One way of examining social class is how people identify themselves. The AES asks respondents to identify themselves as either working class, middle class, or upper class. Very few Australians see themselves as a member of the upper classes, and about half and half say they are working or middle class, respectively. Figure 17 shows how the self-identified working class have voted over time. This shows that the working class are still more likely to vote Labor than Liberal, although the trends over time show a gradual erosion of Labor's working-class base. In the late 1980s, 60% of the working class voted Labor, by 2019 this had dropped to 41%. The drop in support for Labor was in favour of minor parties more so than the Liberal Party. Similarly, the data shows that asset owners are much more likely to vote for the Liberal Party.<sup>37</sup> Class therefore remains an important influence on voter behaviour. Although some of the traditional patterns are eroding, while new class divisions, in particular based on assets, are of greater importance.<sup>38</sup>

Figure 17: Working class vote choice



Note: Estimates are the percentage of first preference votes in the House of Representatives among those who identify themselves as working class.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ian McAllister and Toni Makkai, 'The decline and rise of class voting? From occupation to culture in Australia', *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55, issue 3, 2018, pp. 426–445; Timothy Hellwig and Ian McAllister, 'The Impact of Economic Assets on Party Choice in Australia', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, vol. 28, issue 4, 2018, pp. 516–534.

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 20.

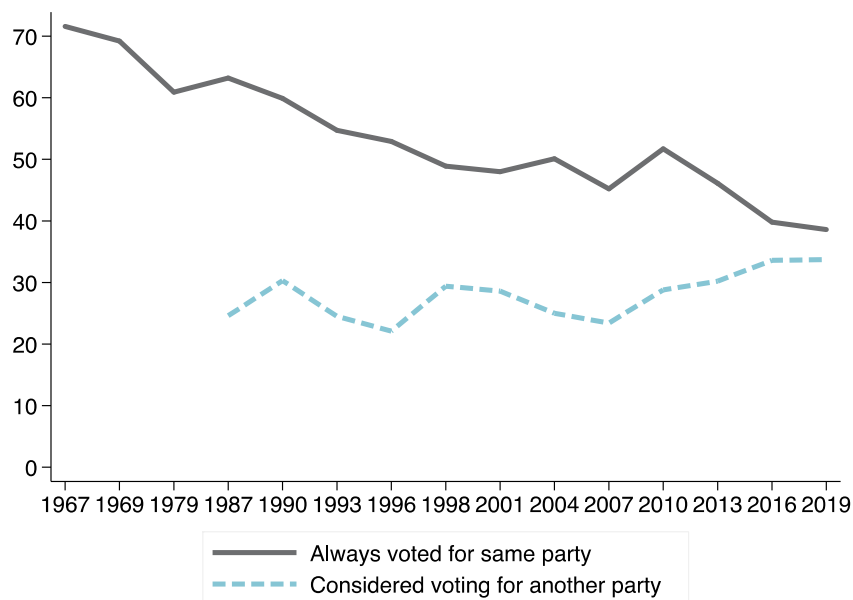
<sup>38</sup> Ian McAllister and Toni Makkai, 'The decline and rise of class voting? From occupation to culture in Australia', *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55, issue 3, 2018, pp. 426–445; Timothy Hellwig and Ian McAllister, 'The impact of economic assets on party choice in Australia', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, vol. 28, issue 4, 2018, pp. 516–534.

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 19.

## Voting volatility

Another major change that has emerged in the Australian electorate over time is increasing voter volatility. Back in the 1960s around 70% of voters would always vote for the same party, by 2019 less than 40% always voted the same way (Figure 18). There are a number of other indicators that point in a similar direction. More voters are making up their mind about how they are going to vote during the election campaign, rather than far in advance.<sup>40</sup> An ever-growing proportion of voters do not align with any of Australia's political parties. Partisanship has reached record lows – one in 5 voters have no partisan alignment.<sup>41</sup> Combined, these factors are resulting in more unpredictable elections. This presents both opportunities and challenges for political parties, who can no longer rely on particular groups of voters for support, increasing the importance of the election campaign and leadership to shift votes.

Figure 18: Voter volatility



Note: Estimates are percentages.<sup>42</sup>

## Citizen disaffection

A final factor where we are seeing major shifts in the electorate is in citizens' attitudes towards democracy. Various indicators show record levels of citizen disaffection with democratic politics in Australia. Satisfaction with democracy in 2019 reached its lowest level since the 1970s Whitlam dismissal; fewer than 60% of Australians were satisfied with the

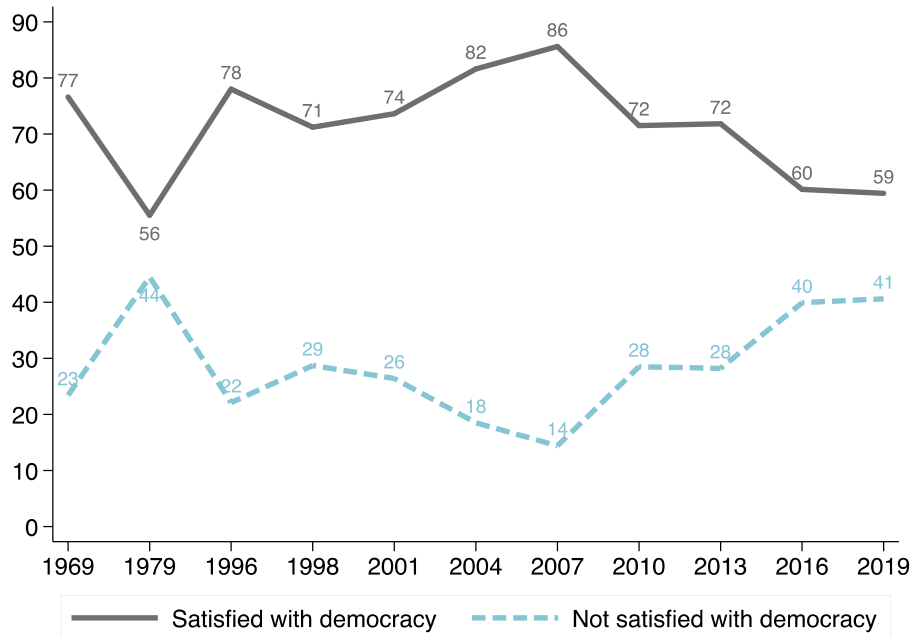
<sup>40</sup> Sarah Cameron, and Ian McAllister, *Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study 1987–2019*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> Sarah Cameron, and Ian McAllister, *Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study 1987–2019*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 28.

<sup>42</sup> Sarah Cameron, and Ian McAllister, *Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study 1987–2019*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p.21; and Don A. Aitkin, *Stability and Change in Australian Politics*, Canberra, ANU Press, 1967–1979.

performance of democracy (Figure 19). Trust in government reached its lowest level on record, with just one in 4 voters believing people in government could be trusted.<sup>43</sup>

**Figure 19: Satisfaction with democracy**



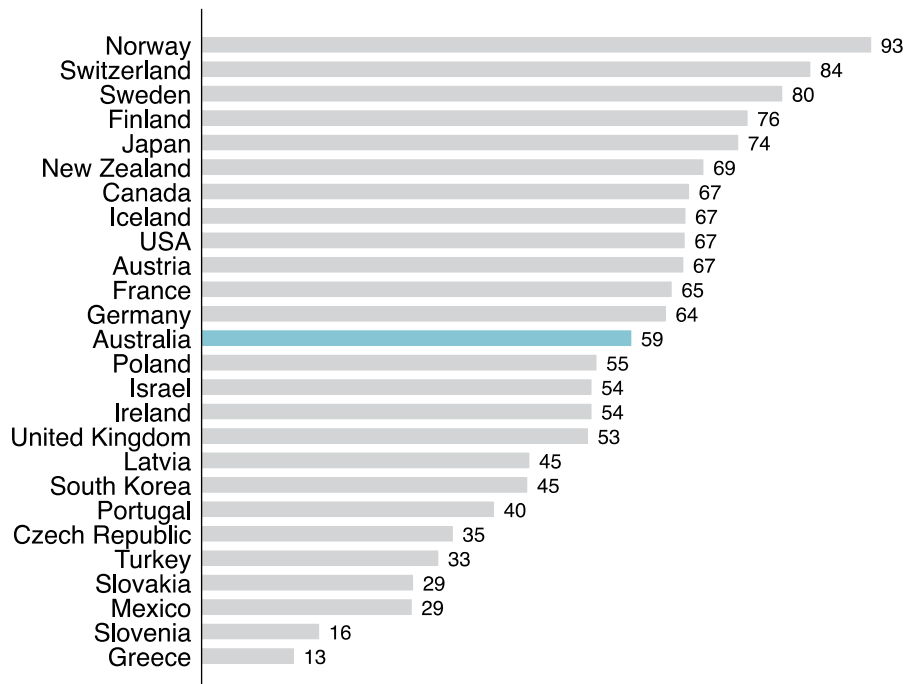
*Note: Estimates are percentages. AES question asks, 'on the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia?' Satisfied combines 'very satisfied' and 'fairly satisfied'; not satisfied combines 'not very satisfied' and 'not at all satisfied'.<sup>44</sup>*

Placing Australia's level of democratic satisfaction in international comparison in Figure 20 shows that in 2007, when Labor won the election led by Kevin Rudd, Australians would have been among the world's most satisfied democrats alongside Norway and Switzerland. Since then, Australia has dropped down to the middle of the pack among democracies in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Comparing the downward trend in satisfaction with democracy in Australia to other democracies around the world shows that this downward trend is not universal (Figure 21).

<sup>43</sup> Sarah Cameron, and Ian McAllister, *Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study 1987-2019*, Canberra, The Australian National University, 2019, p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 15; Don A. Aitkin, *Stability and Change in Australian Politics*, Canberra, ANU Press, 1969–1979.

Figure 20: Satisfaction with democracy in OECD countries



Note: Estimates are percentages combining 'very satisfied' and 'fairly satisfied'.<sup>45</sup>

There has been a decline in satisfaction with democracy in the UK, particularly following the Brexit referendum, and in the US, following Trump's 2016 election win. Canada and New Zealand on the other hand, have not experienced this decline in democratic satisfaction. Some have argued that political disaffection in Australia is simply a reflection of global trends, such as the rise of social media or increasingly disaffected young people. Cross-national trends suggest these factors do not explain the decline in democratic satisfaction, as Canada and New Zealand also have social media and young people however have not experienced a decline. Rather, the evidence suggests that the steep decline in satisfaction with democracy in Australia has been driven primarily by government performance.<sup>46</sup> The merry-go-round of Australian prime ministers during the 2010s undermined democratic satisfaction with democracy, alongside other dimensions of government performance.

<sup>45</sup> Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2019, p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> Sarah Cameron, 'Government performance and dissatisfaction with democracy in Australia', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 55, issue 2, 2020, pp. 170–190.

Figure 21: Satisfaction with democracy in Anglo-American democracies



Note: Estimates are percentages combining 'very satisfied' and 'fairly satisfied'.<sup>47</sup>

## The COVID-19 pandemic and political opinion

So far, we have covered the 2019 election, and the long-term trends up to 2019. Of course, a few things have changed since 2019 with the onset of a major global crisis from the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has significant implications for democratic politics around the world including in Australia. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a multifaceted crisis, combining a major public health crisis with an economic crisis. Research on previous crises gives us some indications as to how crises can shape democratic politics. Previous studies have found that in times of certain crises—particularly military threats—there is a tendency for voters to rally around the flag, where people give greater support to incumbent leaders and governments at a time of crisis.<sup>48</sup> An example of this effect could be seen in 2001 following 9/11, when George W. Bush's approval ratings skyrocketed after the terrorist attack.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, there is a lot of research on how economic conditions influence voter behaviour and attitudes – with the central idea being that people punish governments for poor economic performance. Although in the context of a global crisis, benchmarking can become important – how well the crisis is being handled in comparison to

<sup>47</sup> Sarah Cameron, 'Government performance and dissatisfaction with democracy in Australia', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 55, issue 2, 2020, p. 174.

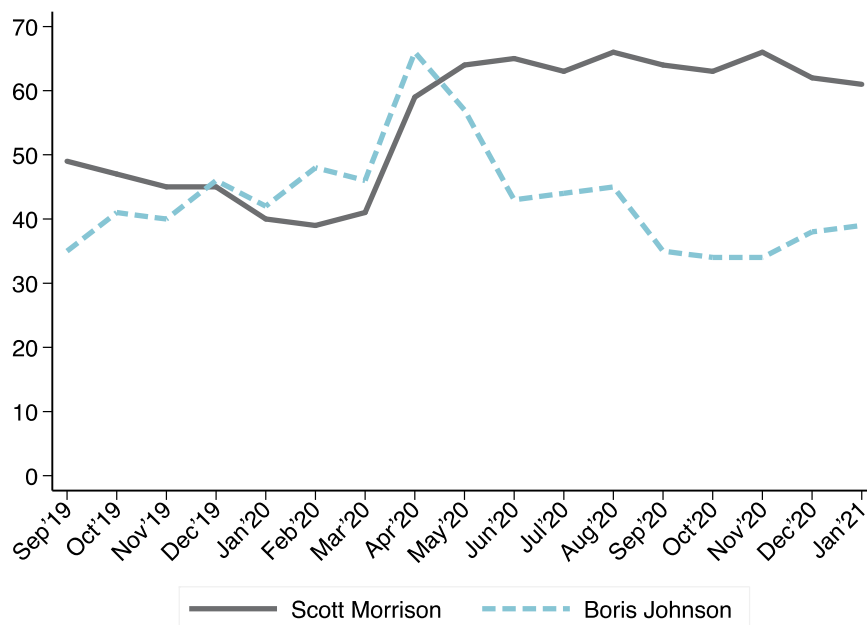
<sup>48</sup> John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, John Wiley & Sons Inc, New York 1973; Matthew A. Baum, 'The Constituent Foundations of the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 46, issue 2, 2002, pp. 263–298.

<sup>49</sup> Marc J. Hetherington and Michael Nelson, 'Anatomy of a Rally Effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 36, issue 1, 2003, pp. 37–42.

other countries.<sup>50</sup> Given the unique nature and unprecedented scale of the COVID-19 crisis, this raises questions about its effects on citizens' attitudes.

To investigate the rally 'round the flag' effect we can examine approval data for leaders—Scott Morrison in Australia as well as Boris Johnson as a point of international comparison. Polling data shows that there was a 'rally round the flag' effect in both Australia and the UK at the beginning of the pandemic, in March to April 2020 when many countries around the world first went into lockdown. Both Scott Morrison and Boris Johnson received a boost in support of around 20 percentage points (Figure 22). In Morrison's case, before the pandemic his approval ratings were exceptionally low as a result of the bushfire crisis which he was perceived as handling poorly.<sup>51</sup> After the initial jump in support at the beginning of the pandemic, Morrison's support remained exceptionally high throughout the pandemic, whereas for Boris Johnson, the 'rally round the flag' effect was relatively short-lived. We could expect this divergence stems from the 2 countries experiences in handling the pandemic, with Australia doing exceptionally well, whereas the UK was one of the most affected countries in terms of COVID-19 cases and deaths.

Figure 22: Approval ratings of Scott Morrison and Boris Johnson



Note: Scott Morrison question asks, 'do you approve or disapprove of the job Scott Morrison is doing as Prime Minister?'<sup>52</sup> Estimates are the percentage that approve. Boris Johnson question asks, 'do you think that Boris Johnson is doing well or badly as Prime Minister?'<sup>53</sup> Estimates are the percentage that respond that he is doing well.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Andreas Kayser and Michael Peress, 'Benchmarking across Borders: Electoral Accountability and the Necessity of Comparison', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 106, issue 3, 2012, pp. 661–684.

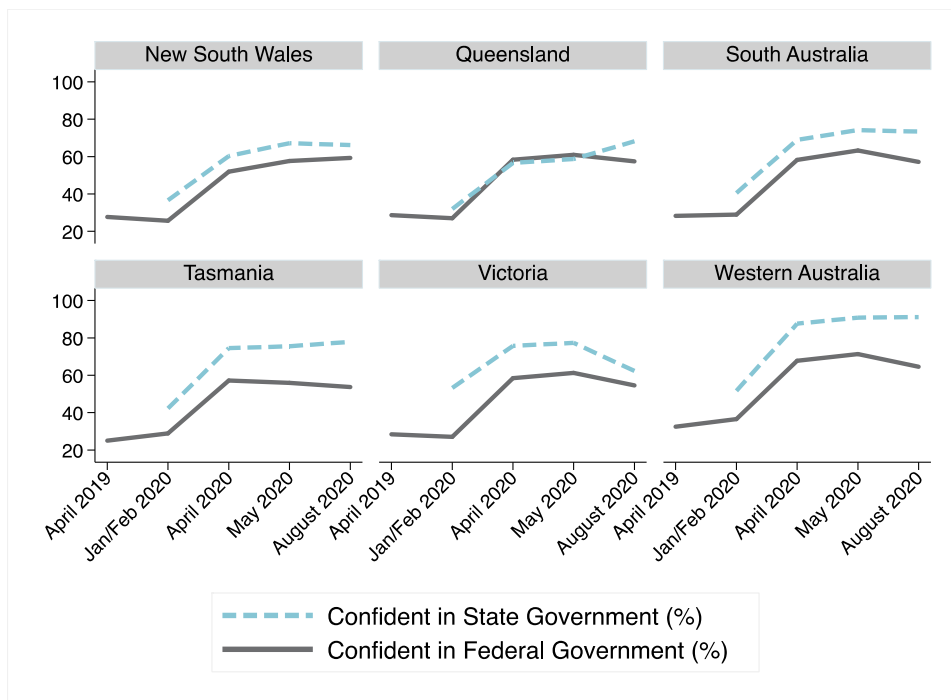
<sup>51</sup> Katharine Murphy, 'Essential poll: Morrison still in the doldrums with voters after bushfires and sports grants', *The Guardian*, 11 February 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Katharine Murphy, 'Essential poll: Morrison still in the doldrums with voters after bushfires and sports grants', *The Guardian*, 11 February 2020.

<sup>53</sup> YouGov, *How well is Boris Johnson doing as Prime Minister?*, Monthly tracker, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/boris-johnson-approval-rating> (accessed 30 March 2023).

ANUPoll data on confidence in state and federal governments in Figure 23 shows further evidence of the ‘rally round the flag’ effect in Australia. Before the pandemic in 2019 political trust had reached record lows. The closely related measure of confidence in government shows that there has been a huge improvement in citizen attitudes towards government during the pandemic. Differentiating the data by state shows that Victorians lost some confidence in the state but not the federal government, at the time of the second wave of COVID-19 in Victoria. This is consistent with the state government’s responsibility for hotel quarantine, which was the source of the outbreak in July 2020. In Queensland, the data shows that confidence in Annastacia Palaszczuk’s government increased when she closed the border to New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria in August 2020.

Figure 23: COVID-19 and confidence in government in Australia



Note: Estimates combine the percentage who reported having ‘a great deal of confidence’ and ‘quite a lot of confidence’ in the government.<sup>54</sup>

While 2020 started with record low levels of trust, the COVID-19 pandemic increased confidence in government and support for incumbents – as a result of voters rallying round the flag at a time of crisis. This increased support for incumbents provides an electoral advantage. Speculation about the possibility of an early election in Australia stems from the high levels of support the government enjoys in early 2021 and the potential to capitalise on that.

<sup>54</sup> Nicholas Biddle and Karuna Reddy, *ANU Poll 2019: Role of the University*, ADA Dataverse, V1, 2019; Nicholas Biddle, Ben Edwards, Diane Herz, Toni Makkai, and Ian McAllister, *ANU Poll 2020: Bushfires, The Environment, and Optimism For The Future*, ADA Dataverse, V2, 2020; Nicholas Biddle, Ben Edwards, Matthew Gray, and Kate Sollis, *ANU Poll 2020: COVID-19 attitudes and behaviours (longitudinal panel data)*, ADA Dataverse, V1, 2020; Nicholas Biddle, Ben Edwards, Matthew Gray, and Kate Sollis, *ANU Poll 2020: COVID-19 attitudes and behaviours, Wave 2 (May)*, ADA Dataverse, V1, 2020; Nicholas Biddle, Ben Edwards, Matthew Gray, and Kate Sollis, *ANU Poll 2020: COVID-19 attitudes and behaviours, Wave 3 (August)*, ADA Dataverse, V1, 2020.

## Conclusion

To sum up, the AES long-term trends show an increasingly volatile electorate. Old divisions such as class and gender are changing over time. The gap between younger and older voters has never been greater, and today's generation of young people are much further to the left than their predecessors. Partisanship has reached record lows. All this contributes to greater unpredictability for electoral politics in Australia.

Following record levels of disaffection in 2019, the COVID-19 crisis, and Australia's relative success in handling the crisis as of February 2021, has ushered in a tremendous boost in support for incumbent governments. The crisis has become the salient issue at the expense of other priority areas. We could expect that continuing support for the current government is conditional on its handling of health and economic dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis.