

Political endangered species

The decline of the major party voter

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As we begin the 21st century, new dilemmas confront our society and our planet. Unprecedented levels of consumption co-exist with extreme poverty. Through new technology we are more connected than we have ever been, yet civic engagement is declining. Environmental neglect continues despite heightened ecological awareness. A better balance is urgently needed.

The Australia Institute's directors, staff and supporters represent a broad range of views and priorities. What unites us is a belief that through a combination of research and creativity we can promote new solutions and ways of thinking.

Our purpose—'Research that matters'

The Institute aims to foster informed debate about our culture, our economy and our environment and bring greater accountability to the democratic process. Our goal is to gather, interpret and communicate evidence in order to both diagnose the problems we face and propose new solutions to tackle them.

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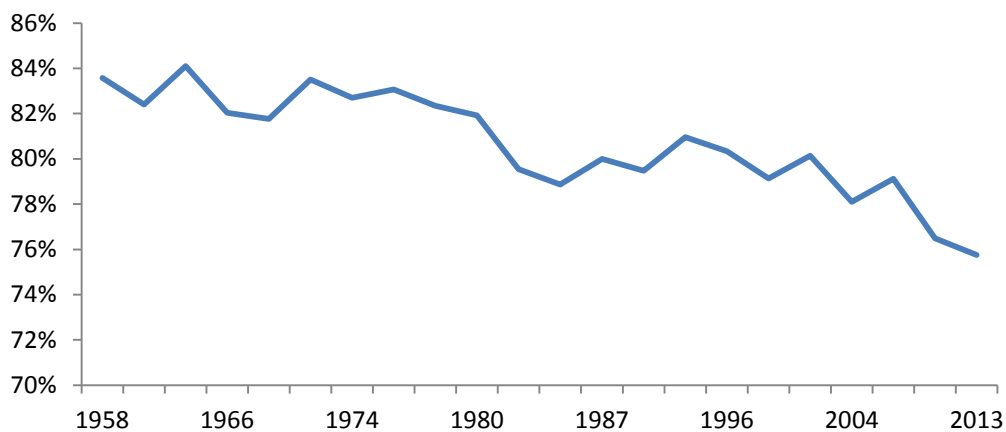
Summary

The state of Australia's democracy has been much maligned in recent times with many commentators lamenting the “chaos” of hung parliaments and powerful crossbenches. While this may have upset the major parties and some commentators the Australian public are far more relaxed about the rise of minor parties and independents. A majority of Australians consider it normal for the government to have to negotiate with crossbenchers.

But the rising influence of minor parties and independents is a symptom rather than the cause of the disconnection between voters and the major parties. It is also likely that this influence will increase with the double dissolution halving the voting quota for a Senate position.

A shrinking portion of Australia's voting age population casts a valid vote in elections. In 2013 federal election only 75 per cent of adult Australians cast a valid vote.

Proportion of voting age population casting a valid vote in HoR¹

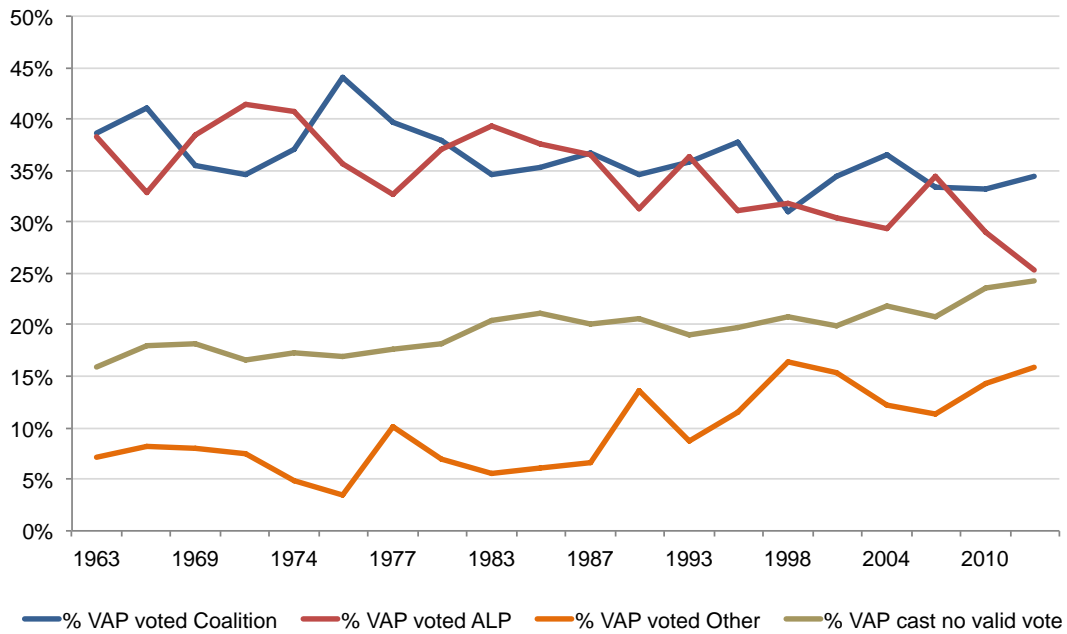


This decline is driven by three trends: a lower portion enrolled to vote, reduced turn out at elections and increasing rates of voters who do turn up failing to cast a valid vote.

In addition to the declining portion of the voting age population who cast a valid vote, votes for major parties have also been declining as a proportion of those votes, while minor parties and independents increased from as low as 4 per cent in the mid-1970s to over 15 per cent at the turn of the century and again in 2013.

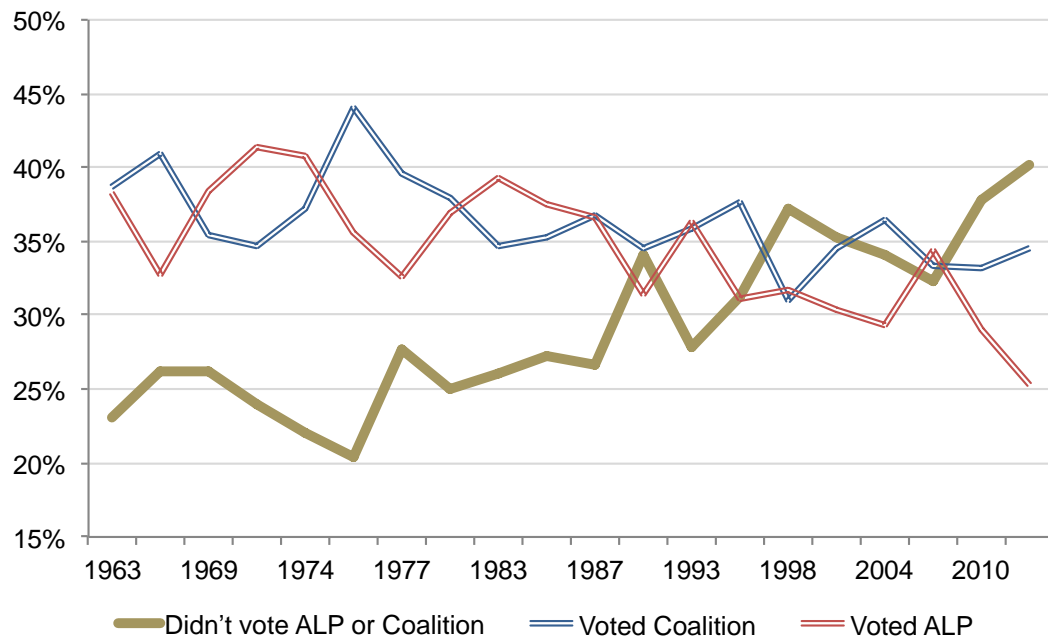
¹ House of Representatives

Support for Coalition, Labor, other parties and casting no valid vote in HoR



Interestingly, the ‘no valid vote’ line above is almost as large as the number of votes for the Labor party in 2013. Another way of looking at this is the number of people who vote for either major party is now lower than those who do not vote for a major party – either by voting for minor parties or not voting at all:

Proportion of adult Australians voting for major parties in HoR



From the late 1990s to 2010 around a third of the voting age population voted for each major party, with the final third voting for neither. If the people who don't vote or don't vote for major parties could be persuaded to make a party of their own, it would be a major one.

This trend accelerated in the 2010 and 2013 elections, with people who didn't vote for major parties far outnumbering those who voted for either the Coalition or Labor. With such a small

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portion of the population voting for major parties, it is very difficult for any government to claim a 'mandate' for their agenda or any particular policy.

NOTE: These figures are based on [IDEA data](#) for adult resident population, including those who are ineligible to enrol. Most of these permanent residents, while having all other responsibilities, including paying taxes, are not eligible to vote under current laws, no matter how long they have been in Australia (unless born in the UK and enrolled before 1984). [AEC figure here](#), exclude these residents from unenrolled total. Given the principle of 'no taxation without representation' and the political focus on the expenditure of 'taxpayers money', voting data has been expressed as a proportion of residents to highlight the declining 'mandate' associated with electoral victory.

This is what Australia's major parties and political commentators must realise – neither Labor nor the Coalition represents a majority of Australians anymore, not even close. They are lucky if they attract the vote of a third of the voting age population. Negotiating with minor parties is the new normal in Australian politics and engaging with non-voters will be crucial for any party seeking to expand its influence.

Introduction

The state of Australia's democracy has been much maligned in recent times.

Following Queensland's shock election result in January 2015, conservative Courier Mail commentator Des Houghton announced the state's voters had "got it wrong" and had plunged Queensland into a state of "chaos" with a hung parliament "exactly the result we didn't want".² Similar sentiments have been expressed about the current Senate and the previous federal lower house.

But the rising influence of the crossbench is a symptom of the disconnect between voters and the major parties, rather than its cause.³

A 2014 survey conducted by the Australian National University found only 43 per cent of Australians believe it makes a difference which party forms government and is in power.⁴ This figure was the lowest since the ANU began the survey in 1996. The survey also found that only 56 per cent of Australians believe their vote makes a difference.

Lowy Institute polling from the same year found only 60 per cent of Australians consider democracy to be preferable to all other forms of government. Younger Australians polled even lower, with only 42 per cent of 18-29 year olds stating democracy was preferable.⁵

The rise of minor parties and independents does not seem to faze the Australian public with an Australia Institute poll finding that more Australians wanted the same or more Senate crossbenchers after the election than those wanting less.

This paper focuses on the claim that our democracy is exhibiting significant signs of decline and also on the rise of the cross bench as a symptom of this decline.

Despite the belief that Australia has 'compulsory voting', a very large, and steadily growing, proportion of the resident population plays no role in electing our federal politicians. As the following sections show, only 75 per cent of adult Australian residents cast a valid vote in the 2013 federal election. Just 37 per cent of adult Australian residents voted for the Coalition Government. Put another way, nearly two thirds of adult Australian residents did not vote for the current government. In turn, claims of an overwhelming government mandate are not based on available evidence.

Public attitudes to minor parties and independents

The major parties and parts of the media often claim the public do not want a Senate that doesn't pass government bills. But is this really the case? The Australia Institute conducted a survey in June 2016 on the public's attitude the current Senate crossbenchers, support or opposition to voting decisions by the crossbench and people's desires for the number of crossbenchers in the next Senate.

The poll was conducted between 23 May and 3 June 2016. It was a national opinion poll of 1,437 people through Research Now, with a nationally representative samples by gender, age and state or territory.

² Houghton D. (2015) How Queensland's voters got it wrong. *The Courier Mail*. Brisbane: News Limited.

³ Rundle G. (2014) Clivosaurus: The Politics of Clive Palmer. *Quarterly Essay*. Melbourne: Schwartz Media.

⁴ McAllister I. (2014) Changing views of governance: Results from the ANUpoll, 2008 and 2014. Canberra: Australian National University.

⁵ Lowy Institute. (2014) Australia and the World. *The Lowy Institute Poll*. Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy.

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The poll found that most people (52%) think it is normal for the government to have to seek support of crossbench Senators to pass legislation, and to risk having it being voted down.

Respondents were asked about five high profile issues and whether they agreed with how a majority of crossbench Senators voted on those issues. The issues were;

- Blocking university fee deregulation
- Voting to abolish the carbon price
- Voting to abolish the mining tax
- Voting to keep renewable energy funding and
- Voting to block plans to stop young people from receiving unemployment payments for up to six months.

Around half of people agreed with three or more of the decisions made by the crossbench Senators and 85% supported at least one of the decisions. By far the most popular result from crossbench voting decisions was blocking cuts to renewable energy funding with 69% agreeing that it should have been blocked.

Respondents were also asked about the number of crossbench senators they would like to see in the next Senate. A third said the next Senate should have more or the same number of crossbenchers, compared with 28% who think there should be fewer.

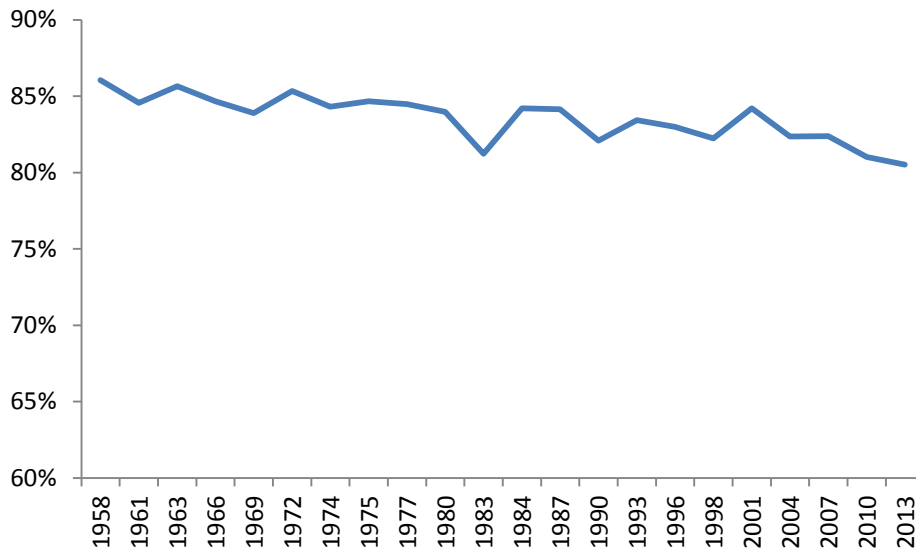
Even 23% of Coalition voters wanted more or the same number of crossbenchers in the Senate with a further 25% unsure. For Labor voters 42% wanted the same or more crossbenchers with a further 42% unsure.

This poll shows that the general public is very accepting of the senate being made up of a significant number of minor party and independent members. Rather than strong opposition to such a situation the public seem to view it as a normal part of our democracy. While the major parties and some of their backers would rather have complete control over the legislative process, it would appear the public would prefer that the government of the day have to negotiate their legislative agenda and face the possibility of having it voted down.

Lower electoral participation

Participation in Australian Federal elections has fallen over the last fifty years. While the voting age population has increased from 6 million in the late 1950s to 17 million at the 2013 election, the proportion of people who vote has declined. In 1958, 86 per cent of the voting age population voted. This declined steadily to 81 per cent at the 2013 federal election, as shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Participation in Australian federal elections 1958 to 2013



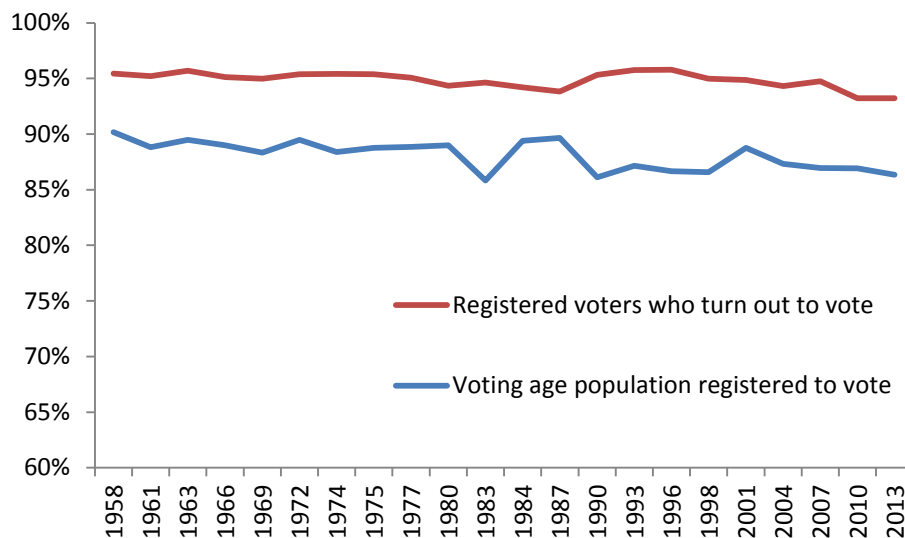
Source: (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)

This decline in the portion of the voting aged population that votes is driven by two mechanisms:

- A decline in the portion of the voting age population that is registered to vote, and;
- A decline in the turnout of registered voters.

Both of these measures have shown slow but steady decline over this time period, as shown in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Rates of registration and voter turn-out 1958 to 2013



Source: (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)

Figure 2 shows that the proportion of the voting age population that is enrolled to vote has declined from 90 per cent in 1958 down to 86 per cent in 2013. The turn-out rate of voters to

actually vote in elections has also declined slightly from highs of 96 per cent in the mid-1990s to an historic low of 93 per cent in 2013.

The estimated number of people missing from the roll is increasing, as population growth is faster than roll growth.⁶

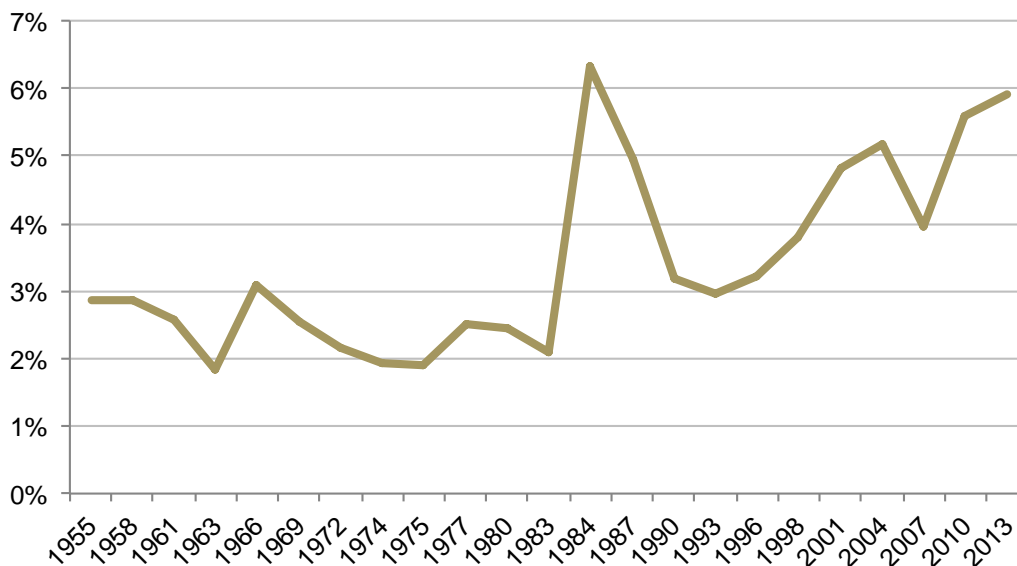
While these declines may seem slight, they are compounded by a rising rate of informal voting.

Fewer people who cast a ballot cast a formal vote

Contrary to popular belief, Australia does not have compulsory voting. Rather, what is compulsory is to attend a polling place, have your name marked off, receive a ballot paper and put it in a ballot box.⁷ Actually voting is not compulsory, or at least it is not practical for the authorities to enforce.

As Figure 5 shows, while the number of Australians who attend to these obligations but do not cast a formal vote has trended upwards over the past 50 years:

Figure 3: Informal vote share of total votes cast in HoR



Source: (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)

Figure 3 shows that around two per cent of votes cast in the 1970s were informal, compared to nearly six per cent at the last election. The large spike in 1984 coincides with the introduction of above the line voting in the Senate. A large number of voters inadvertently used the new Senate voting system for House of Representatives ballots, making their votes invalid.⁸

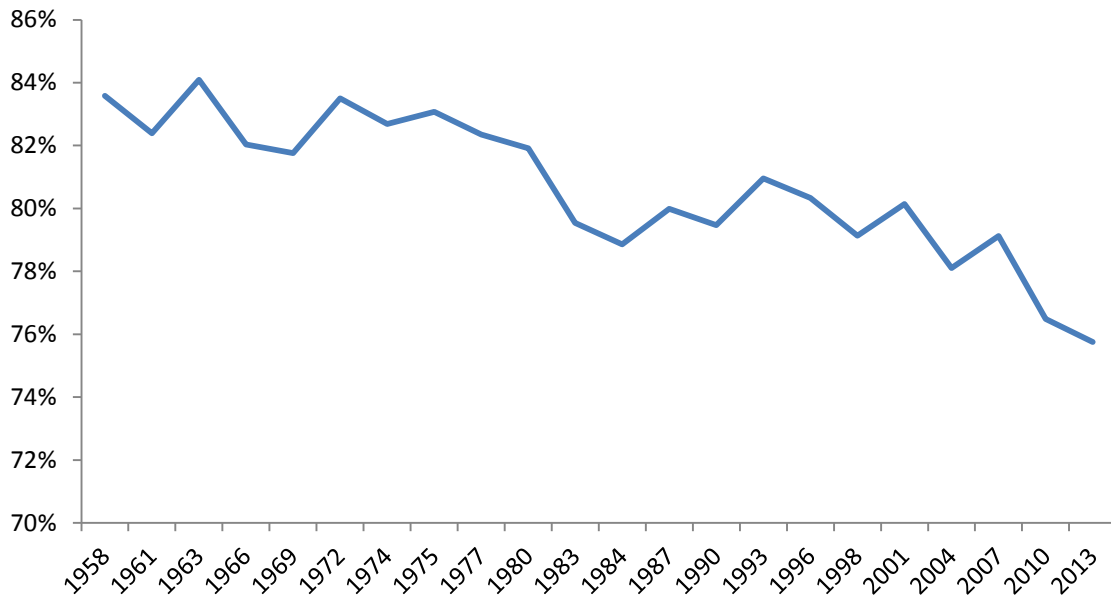
Combining these factors together, we see that an increasing portion of the voting age population casts no formal vote, as shown in Figure 4 below:

⁶ <http://annualreport.aec.gov.au/2013/contents/files/aec-annual-report-12-13.pdf>

⁷ See http://www.aec.gov.au/about_aec/Publications/voting/files/compulsory-voting.pdf, page 4

⁸ <http://electionwatch.edu.au/australia-2013/analysis/informal-voting-rise>

Figure 4: Proportion of voting age population casting a valid vote in HoR

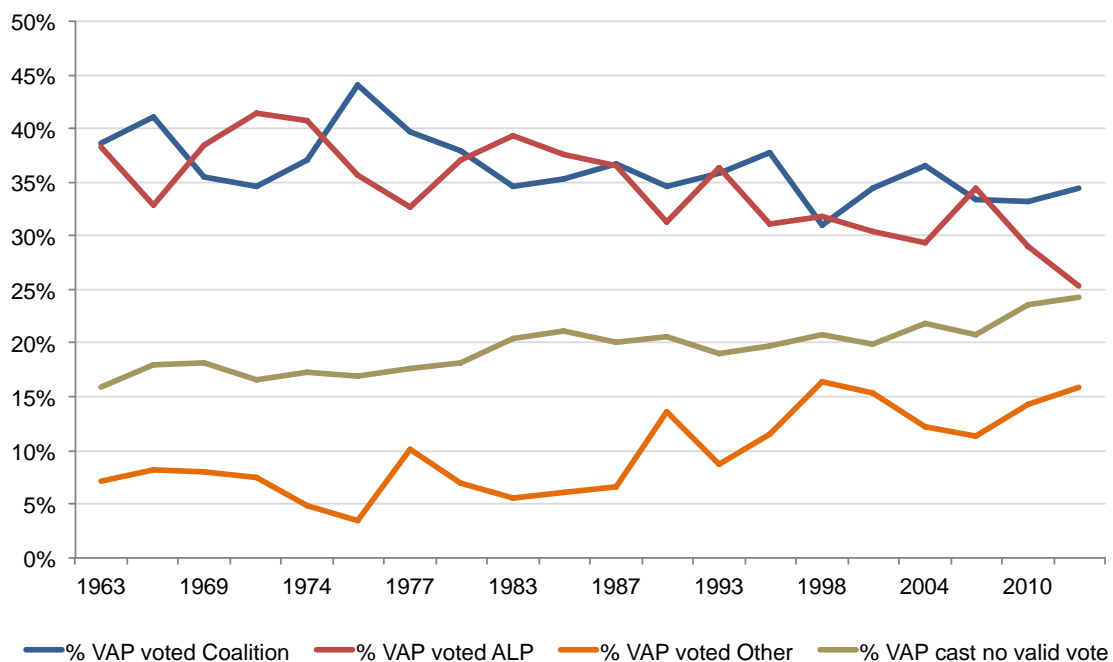


Source: (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)

Declining major party vote

Opinion polls and election results are often reported in terms of the ‘market share’ of the two major parties. However, as the data above make clear the size of the ‘market’ has been shrinking steadily. Figure 5 shows the steady erosion of the ‘market share’ of the two major parties compared to those who do not cast a valid vote and those who vote for minor parties.

Figure 5: Share of voting age supporting major parties, minor parties, and casting no valid vote in HoR



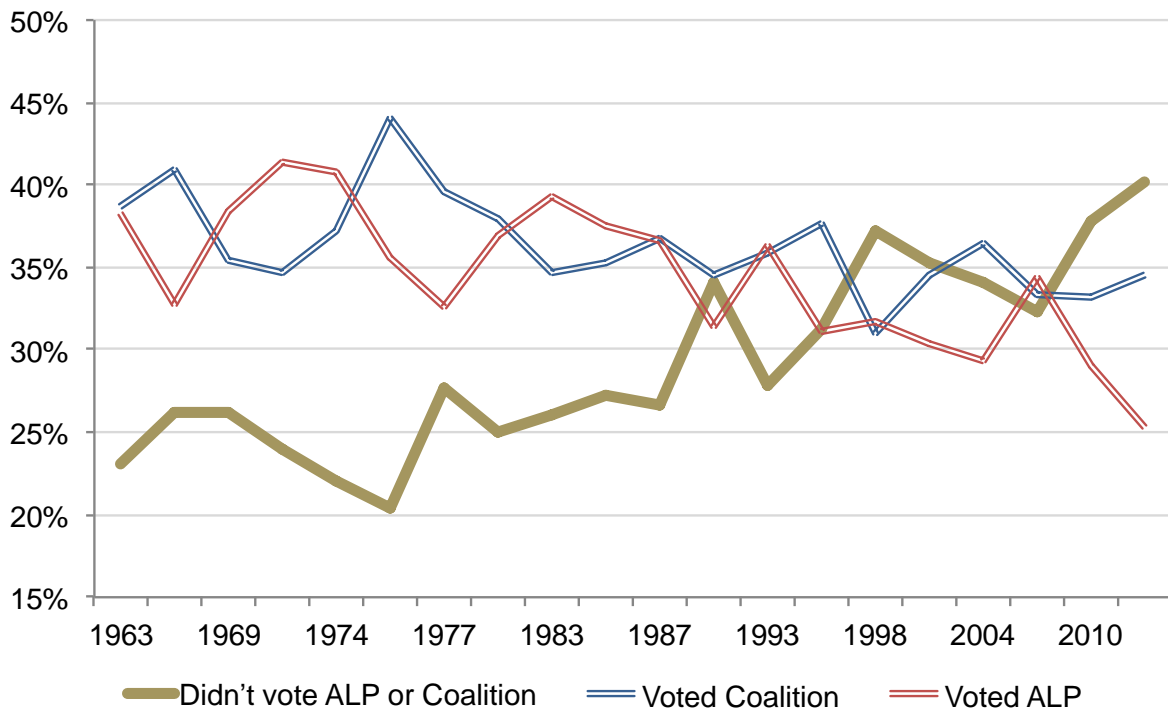
Source: (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)

Figure 5 shows that not only have the portion of people who cast no valid vote grown, but in the 2013 election the no valid vote share is almost as large as the number of votes for the ALP.

Similar growth is shown for the portion of voters voting for non-major parties, increasing from as low as 4 per cent in the mid-1970s to over 15 per cent at the turn of the century and again in 2013. Electoral support for minor parties and independents is often described as a ‘protest vote’. Leaving aside why voting for a candidate who does not represent one of the two ‘major parties’ is seen as a ‘protest’ rather than an endorsement of the values or policies of that candidate, a focus on changes in the non-major party vote is likely to significantly understate the extent of disenfranchisement with the major parties.

Figure 6 shows that the proportion of adult residents who either do not vote or vote for independent and minor party candidates in federal elections has nearly doubled over the past 50 years and now represents 40 per cent of the resident population.⁹

Figure 6: Proportion of adult Australians voting for major parties in HoR

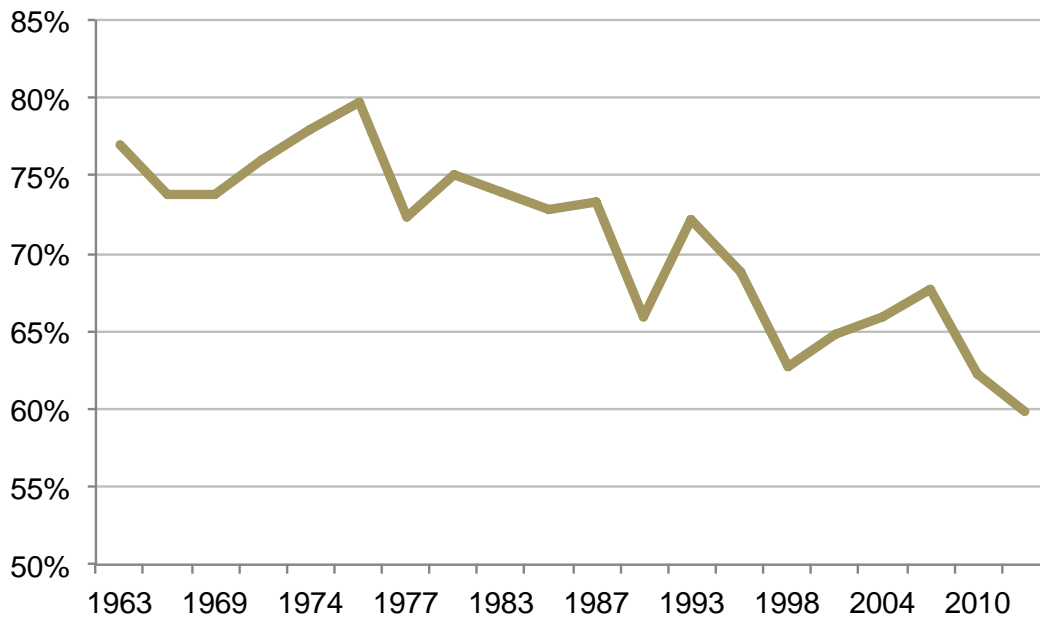


Source: (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)

As shown in Figure 7 below, a declining proportion of voting age Australian residents votes for the major parties.

⁹ The data in Figure 6 represents lower house votes and shows those that didn't vote for minor parties was 40% of the voting age population.

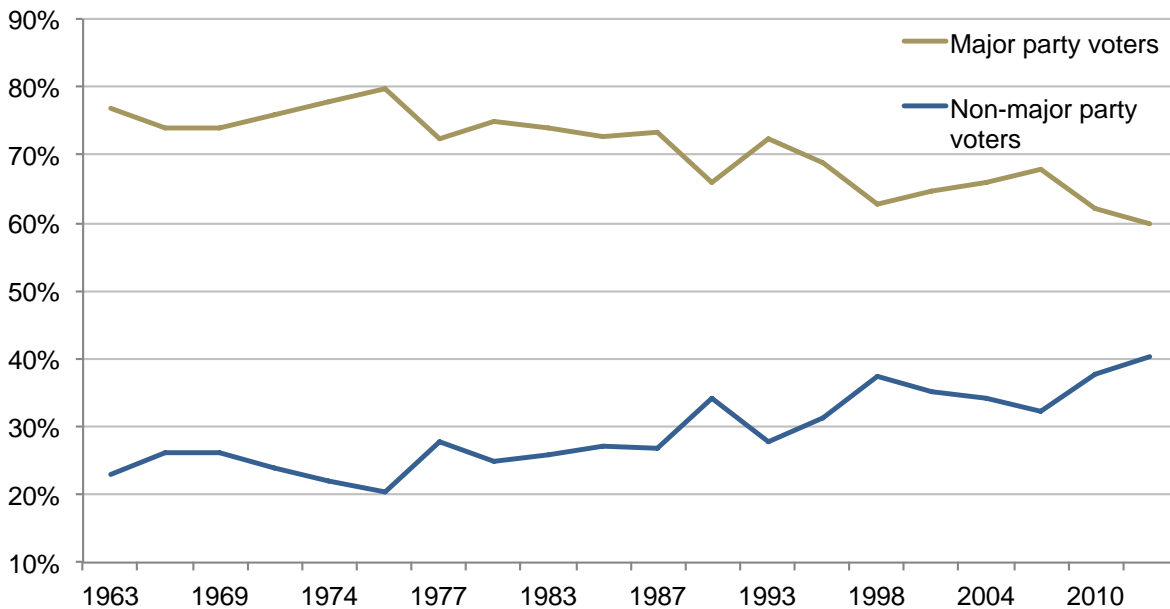
Figure 7: Proportion of Australia's adult population who cast a primary vote for either major party (combined ALP and Coalition) in HoR



Source: (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)

Put another way, more Australians support independent candidates, minor party candidates or no candidates than support either party of government in Australia.

Figure 8: Proportion of valid votes supporting major, minor parties in HoR



Source: (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)

Conclusion

Australia's major parties and political commentators must realise that neither Labor nor the Coalition represents a majority of Australians anymore. They are lucky if they attract the vote of a third of the voting age population. Engaging with non-voters will be crucial for any party seeking to expand its influence.

Negotiating with minor parties is the new normal in Australian politics and the general public seems comfortable with that outcome. The double dissolution election will see the quota required to get a Senate seat half at the next election and it is possible that more minor party and independents will be elected.

The idea that being able to form government granted a party a mandate to enact whatever legislation it wanted is not an idea based on current evidence.

References

Data in all charts is from the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance Global Database on Elections and Democracy, available on its website: <http://www.idea.int/db/>