

Is demography moving against the Coalition?

Does demography favour the Liberal/National Party Coalition in Australia, or is there a shift underway in the opposite direction?

As is well known, John Howard's Coalition has struck a chord with older Australians over the last decade. Large proportions of older voters (those aged 60 and over) have consistently favoured the Liberal/National Parties since the mid 1990s, with the first preference vote for the Coalition in this age group averaging well over 50 per cent.

As the population ages, can we expect this voting pattern to continue, leading to a consolidation of support for the conservative parties? Or, on the other hand, will the movement of 'baby boomers' into the ranks of older Australians moderate this conservatism, and perhaps even reverse it?

Examining 17 years of *Newspoll* public opinion polling data about people's voting intentions in the lead up to the Federal elections is very revealing.¹ Looking at the *gap* between the support for the Coalition by a particular age group, and the overall average for all age groups, provides a useful way of tracking a cohort of voters over time.

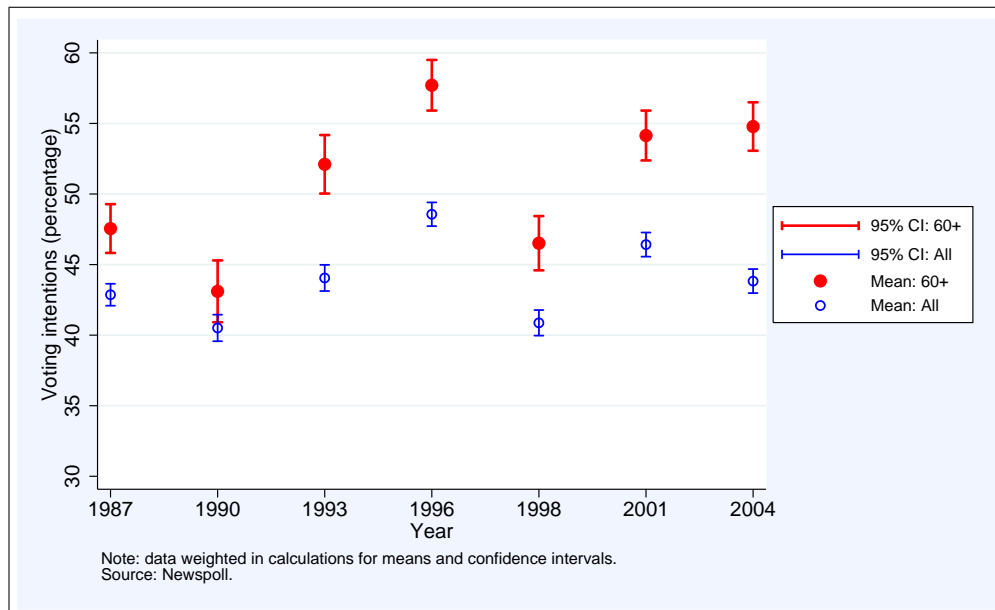


Figure 1: Voting for Lib/National Coalition: 60+ year olds

Looking first at older Australians (shown as solid red dots in Figure 1.1), it is quite clear that they have supported the Coalition to a much greater extent than the overall average (shown as hollow blue dots). Over this 17 year period, the age gap favouring the Coalition has ranged from 5 to 10 percentage points.

¹ Thanks go to Sol Lebovic, then of *Newspoll*, for his help in providing data and for discussing preliminary findings with *Australian Policy Online*. Thanks also to Murray Goot for feedback and useful advice, and to Peter Browne for commissioning the report.

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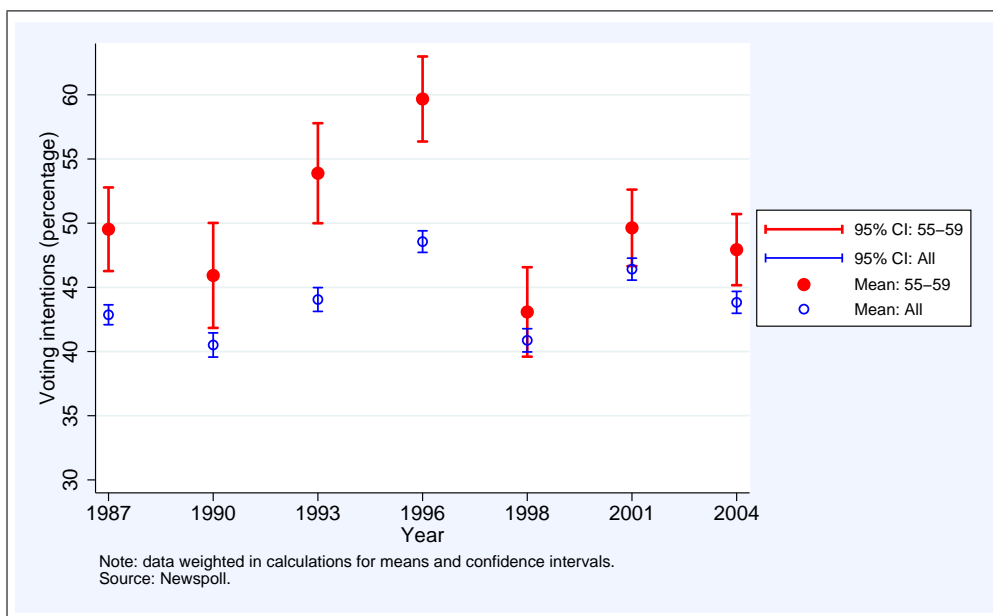


Figure 2: Voting for Lib/National Coalition: 55-59 year olds

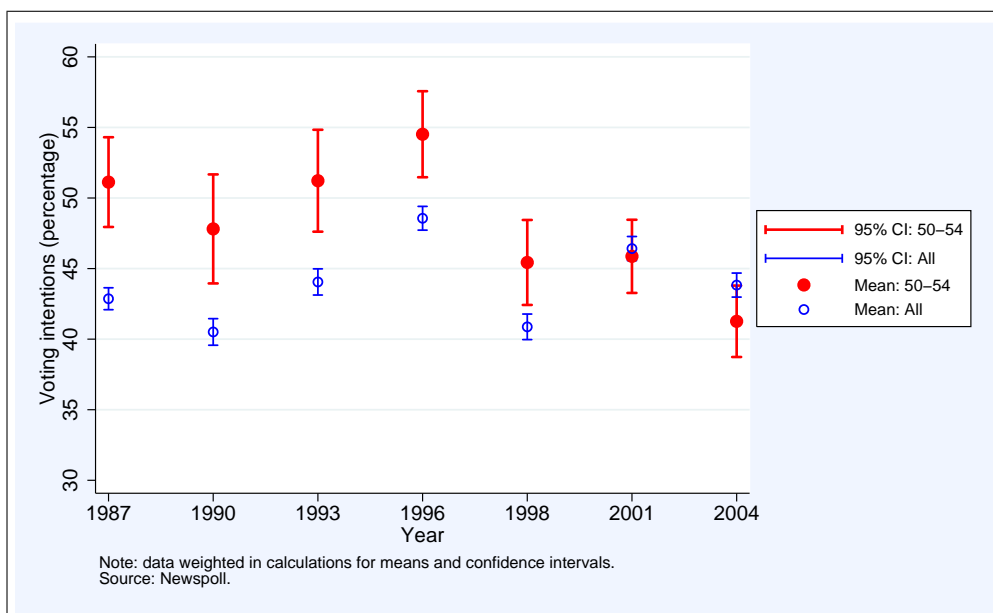


Figure 3: Voting for Lib/National Coalition: 50-54 year olds

If we turn now to 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 1.2 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. 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’.

This notion finds more support in the data for the next younger age group—those aged 50 to 54. If we look at Figure 1.3 the 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. However, in 2001 and 2004 this gap evaporated entirely (and even appeared to be reversing in 2004). By 2001, this age cohort was made up entirely of early ‘baby boomers’: those born between 1947 and 1951.

What appears to be happening in the *Newspoll* data is that an overall trend whereby older voters favour the Coalition has begun to break down. Importantly, over the course of the last two elections this has happened among voters aged in their 50s who have suddenly turned away from the Coalition. 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 early 1950s. In other words, the shift away from the Coalition among this particular group of older voters coincides with the arrival of a significant cohort of early ‘baby boomers’ in their ranks.

If the sentiments of these ‘baby boomers’ are still Whitlamesque, if they can remember an era when social reform flourished, and if their aversion to economic rationalism and hyper-individualism remains intact, then one can easily imagine that many of these voters will be hostile to the Coalition. The data in these graphs seems to fit this interpretation.

In summary, while in general older voters favour the Liberal/National Parties, the greying of the ‘baby boomers’ appears to be over-turning this truism. This may well signal a demographic shift working against the Coalition in coming years.

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