

Myth of the Ethnic Vote

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Does the 'ethnic vote' exist? If it does, will it have any political clout in the 2 March elections?

Nick Economou examines the complexities of the ethnic lobby and its potential.

The importance of the "ethnic vote" and the legitimacy of claims by community leaders that they can influence a significant constituent block is worth investigating in light of the imminent federal election. The problems associated with trying to understand the nature, scope and influence of "ethnic" voting begin with attempting to construct an adequate definition of that which constitutes an "ethnic" voter. The indicators of ethnicity used for this paper include the rate at which persons living in Australian federal electorates are born in overseas countries other than Britain, Ireland, South Africa and New Zealand, and the rate at which people speak a language other than English (LOTE) at home. These indicators are not exhaustive criteria of ethnicity; apart from the English-speaking "ethnic" groups that are excluded, this approach does not fully address the question of how people born in Australia of non-English speaking background parents are to be considered, for in some communities a strong sense of ethnic identity persists in the Australian born generations. On the other hand, taking an approach that places stress on the question of language is an extremely useful guide, for the issue of language has long been one of the major themes underpinning Australian multiculturalism. In this sense, it is precisely those who perceive themselves to be somewhat apart from the English-dominant

norm in Australian society that analysts and politicians are particularly interested in, because this appears to be one of the key dividing points between "ethnic" and "Anglo-Celtic" Australia.

If "ethnicity" is understood as relating to being born somewhere outside of the English-speaking world, and that a language other than English is spoken at home, then the social data derived from the 1991 census applied to federal electoral boundaries indicates that there is an "ethnic" vote to the extent that there are electorates with rates of culturally diverse backgrounds and language other than English (LOTE) households varying significantly from the national average. These electorates do - by virtue of the compulsory voting system - require Australian citizens within them to cast a ballot at federal elections. In a sense, the existence of an ethnic vote is the combined product of economics, geography and the Australian electoral system. The relationship between higher rates of migration and LOTE households with electorates with higher levels of trades-and-labour employment profiles is the first important point to note here. Historically, Australia's migrants have discharged the role of factory fodder particularly in the nation's manufacturing sector. Consequently, the lower incomes earned from such employment and the need to live in proximity to the workplace has meant that migrants have tended to congregate in the "working class" suburbs in the major capital cities (especially Sydney, Melbourne and, to a lesser extent, Adelaide). As the system used to elect the Australian House of Representatives is based on single member electorates representing a specific geographic location made up of roughly equal numbers of voters brought together on a vague notion of a unity of community identity, this has meant that in Australia there are a number of federal lower house seats that are, for all intents and purposes, "ethnic" seats. In this sense, then, an "ethnic"

vote might be thought to exist, and certainly policy matters pertaining to the interests of Australians from culturally diverse backgrounds would be keenly appreciated in these areas.

Having acknowledged that an "ethnic" vote does exist in the sense that there is a (small) number of seats with a high concentration of voters from culturally diverse backgrounds and LOTE households, the next problem in isolating an "ethnic" vote is to ascertain the extent to which these voters diverge from the dominant patterns of the electoral manifestation of Australian political culture. It is at this point that the evidence of divergence is extremely scant. The dominant feature of the "ethnic vote" as outlined above is that it is overwhelmingly - but not exclusively - a vote that is aligned with the ALP. Of the top "ethnic" federal electorates, all but three (the Victorian seats of Wills, Menzies and Bruce) were, on the basis of the way they voted in the 1993 federal election, Labor seats. Of these 17 Labor seats, all but two - Lowe and Barton in NSW - were either safe or ultrasafe Labor seats. And of the recalcitrant non-Labor seats in Victoria, one - the seat of Wills - was won by Phil Cleary who probably sits just a little further left of the ALP on the Australian political spectrum. The deviation of Menzies and Bruce from the regular pattern is also explainable by referring to their socioeconomic composition: whereas the average rate of persons employed as professionals, managers and administrators for the top twenty "ethnic" seats was 19.6 per cent, Menzies and Bruce were way above this average at 32.1 and 28.9 per cent respectively; with the consequence of this being a higher level of annual and family income. Put simply, the "ethnic" vote is, in the main, a subset of "blue-collar" voting and this, in turn, means that the "ethnic" seats overwhelmingly vote Labor because the ALP is the party of blue-collar Australia. Far from deviating from the norm, here lies one of the clearest examples of how "ethnic" voting is completely in line with the patterns of the dominant political culture.

Even the Menzies and Bruce results are completely consistent with this pattern. Both of

these seats are Liberal seats because they cover a much more affluent part of the Melbourne suburbs. The high component of southern Europeans in both seats is suggestive of a certain degree of upward social mobility amongst this cohort, and that voting alignments vary according to this variation in the relationship of voters to the economy. To put it another way, the constant factors that influence voting behaviour include the voter's relationship to the economy, the voter's rate of capital ownership and income, the voter's occupation, the place where the voter lives, and the voter's expectations of the political process. Ethnicity does not appear to vary these constants. In short, voting behaviour is more likely to be determined by the voter's relationship to the dominant mode of production rather than by ethnicity.

Even if proponents of the claim that an ethnic constituency does exist and can be mobilised to impact on election outcomes are not convinced by the argument that ethnic voting is, in the main, blue collar voting and therefore closely aligned with the ALP, other factors can be cited to mitigate the claim that "ethnic" leaders have an important electoral resource at their disposal. Once again the list of the nation's top twenty "ethnic" seats provides an insight into the relative stability of these seats; of the top twenty seats, only two - the Victorian seat of Wills and the NSW seat of Lowe - have been the subject of a transfer between the parties in any federal election held since 1983. Whilst it is true that some of these seats have been marginal, the lack of transfer is indicative of the overall pattern that "ethnic" voters tend to be caught in relatively safe seats, be they Labor or, occasionally, Liberal. This apparent absence of volatility capable of allowing seats to be won or lost by the major parties represents a major limitation on the political effectiveness of the "ethnic vote". In an electoral system in which the importance of the result lies less in the size of the vote garnered, and more in the number of seats won and lost, the "ethnic" vote would appear to be lacking in strategic importance.

As if the propensity for the "ethnic vote" to be

largely contained within the electoral boundaries of federal seats that just do not change hands from election to election is not a severe enough constraint upon the electoral importance of this vote, the diversity and fragmentation of that which might be thought of as the "ethnic vote" acts as a further impediment to its significance.

Invariably, Australia's most "ethnic" seats are also ethnically diverse - that is, there are no seats in which any particular "ethnic group" comprises a minority of such significance as to be a potential constituent to block the voting alignment of what can mean the difference between one or the other of the major political parties winning that seat. This factor in itself acts to mitigate the political utility for any party attempting to address the demands of a specific group where those demands are the source of inter-community rivalry, for there is associated with this type of politics the real threat of alienating several groups in a bid to curry favour with one.

The lack of any real concentration of voters of a specific group, and the rather dubious proposition that all "ethnic" voters can be persuaded to alter their voting alignment on the basis of one "ethnic"-oriented issue, doesn't stop ethnic community leaders from claiming an ability to influence their constituency and, as a result, election outcomes. It is precisely the threats made by ethnic community leaders to use their ability to direct the voting intentions of specific elector blocks that is arguably of greatest significance to party strategists. It is, presumably, one of the claims ethnic community leaders make as a basis for seeking to exert leverage on the political process via the political parties. Yet ethnic community leaders who claim that they can control a particular block of votes whose shifting alignment determines the outcome of the electoral contest for that seat do so with little corroborative evidence. There is nothing in the election statistics to indicate that such constituent-block voting does exist in Australian federal elections, although, to be fair, the conditions to test this hypothesis have not really existed.

Until then, analysts can really only make assessments based on the performances of other specific-issue minor parties in federal contests. For example, a party like Australians Against Further Immigration (AAFI) (which ostensibly trawls the same policy waters as many ethnic groups although from a very different perspective) has tended to win only minuscule amounts of primary votes in general federal elections. This contrasts, however, with its recent ability to win quite significant primary votes in by-elections. Apart from the fact that most of these notable results occurred in the absence of a genuine party competition (with either Liberal, Labor or Australian Democrats failing to contest), the AAFI by-election performance reminds us that greater scope for minor parties exists in by-election situations where the usual run of major policy issues - the economy and governmental performance - can take a back seat to more specific issues. In other words, the dominant themes in Australian political culture as it pertains to electoral contests include the dominance of voting for major political parties, persistence of a social cleavage based on the relationship of voters to the dominant mode of production, and predominance of a clutch of mainstream policy and political issues that provide the variation on class voting - specifically, how the economy is being managed, how the voter assesses the impact of the economy on their material well-being, and how they perceive the role of the government. As yet, there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that "ethnic" voters defy any of these major patterns. Or to put it another way, the delineation of an "ethnic" vote from, presumably a "non-ethnic" vote cannot be based on a variation from the norms of mainstream political and electoral behaviour simply because there is no real evidence of major variations. "Ethnic" voters are, in sum, like voters everywhere else in Australia whose voting behaviour is discharged within a political context dominated by compulsory voting and major-party politics.

Whilst the fact that there are a number of Australians on the electoral roll who were born in a non-English speaking country and for

whom policy matters pertaining to the particular needs and interests of such voters are of importance is beyond doubt, the claim that such people comprise readily identifiable constituent blocks whose voting alignments can be and are influenced by the advice and direction given by "ethnic community" leaders is a highly dubious proposition. The strong correlation between federal electorates with high levels of ethnic diversity and a strong primary vote for the Australian Labor Party is not simply the product of the ALP being more sensitive to "ethnic" demands relative to the other political parties. Rather, this apparent alignment of the "ethnic" vote with the ALP is a reflection of the class basis that continues to underpin the profoundly important cleavages present in Australian society. The 1991 Australian census showed that the very seats in which "ethnic" concentration and diversity are strongest are those seats with high rates of blue-collar employment, lower-than-average rates of annual family income, and high rates of manufacturing and trades and labour employment - in short, working class seats. And, in a pattern entirely consistent with the main themes in Australian political culture, these seats are strong Labor voting divisions. The exceptions are a couple of mid-range Liberal seats distinguishable from the main clutch of "ethnic" seats by their higher levels of professional employment and the higher rates of annual family income.

Whilst there is no denying that an "ethnic" politics exists in Australia and that, given this nation's normative commitments to freedoms of speech and association, and given the pluralist nature of its political culture, it is legitimate, its electoral foundation is dubious to say the least. So little evidence exists to suggest that any particular "ethnic" groups can sway electoral outcomes, whilst the geographic fact that the "ethnic" vote is already highly concentrated in electorates that, in the main, just do not change hands from one election to another seriously mitigates any claim "ethnic" leaders might have to being able to sway the outcome of election contests. It is more likely that the real influence of ethnic community leaders lies less in electoral contests and more in those areas that play an

important role in deciding who will contest elections - specifically, within the political parties and in the critically important preselection processes. In the meantime, if electoral considerations do lie at the basis of the response of institutional actors to policy demands from "ethnic groups", then this is either the result of community leaders overstating their electoral importance, politicians misunderstanding the nature of the electoral system, or more likely - that institutional actors perceive the electoral appeal of policies such as multiculturalism to extend beyond the confines of "ethnic groups" to be embraced by the community at large regardless of its ethnicity.

This article is a condensed version of a paper which appeared in the Australian Rationalist. Nick Economou is a lecturer in the Politics Department at Monash University.