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‘Aspirational voters’ and the 2004 federal election

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In the lead-up to the 2004 election, Mark Latham talked much about Labor’s need to appeal to voters he called ‘aspirational’. A Google search using the term ‘aspirational voter’ produces dozens of hits, as political commentators, pundits, and leaders grapple with explaining voters’ changing party preferences. During the election campaign, a consensus emerged that these ‘aspirationals’ would play a crucial role in determining the election outcome, especially in outer metropolitan electorates, where the Howard government held eleven seats by a margin of less than six per cent (Davies & Noonan 2004). So should we believe that those deemed ‘aspirational’ played a role in shaping the outcome of the 2004 poll?

THE RISE OF THE ASPIRATIONAL VOTER

‘Aspirational voter’ is another way of saying ‘middle class voter’ with one important difference: many voters’ current middle class status rests on the fragile foundation of high levels of personal and household debt. Economic recessions in the mid-1970s, the early 1980s and early 1990s caused widespread employment insecurity and periods of declining real wages. By the late 1990s the mood shifted markedly as many voters experienced steady improvements in their disposable incomes, home values appreciated and, importantly, banks invited their customers to borrow heavily at a time when interest rates reached a 30 year low (Harding 2005). In this environment Australian middle class affluence was, in a fashion, reborn after being shaken during periodic recessions.

Appreciative of how affluence may shape political values in the outer suburbs, Latham sought to reorient the Labor Party’s focus away from its traditional social democratic values and wrote books (1998; 2001) advocating policy couched in the language of the so-called ‘Third Way’ (Glover 2004). Like British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Latham argued that public policy should place more stress on the obligations of citizens to support themselves and less on government provision of services. Tax cuts for middle and high income earners became the vogue and increasing the size of the welfare safety net was frowned upon. Latham sought to fashion Labor Party rhetoric to appeal to individual incentive and ambition. At his first press conference as leader he said, ‘I stand for things I’ve been doing all my life, working hard, studying hard ... [and] I believe in an upwardly mobile society where people can climb the ladder of opportunity to a better life for themselves and their families.’ The ‘ladder of opportunity’ became Latham’s key metaphor for encapsulating the Australian version of Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour’ and, in theory, its appeal to individualism and ambition would erode the Liberal’s grip on ‘middle Australia’, particularly in the outer suburbs.

Latham sought to fashion Labor Party rhetoric to appeal to individual incentive and ambition.

A host of demographic, social and economic factors are bandied around to define the ‘aspirational voter’. Objectively, they are middle income earners, upwardly mobile, and may be employed in either blue or white collar occupations. More speculative is the view that they are vulnerable to interest rate rises due to high levels of personal debt (Hewitt 2004). Pundits describe the aspirational outlook as entrepreneurial and individualistic. Aspirationalists have been variously described as the new ‘conservative right’—anti-egalitarian and anti-union, favouring tax cuts, driving new cars, and sending their kids to private schools (Carney 2001; Green 2001; Stephens 2001; Henderson 2001; MacKay 2001; Davidson 2001; Hamilton 2003; Burchell 2003; Glover 2004; Manne 2004).

MEASURING ASPIRATION?

Is it possible to devise a test of these largely anecdotal descriptions of what constitutes an aspirational voter? Large surveys such as the *Australian Election Study 2004* (AES 2004) (Bean et al 2005) enable an approximate account. The AES 2004 asks many questions, and although income and occupational status are well covered, few questions relate to the more anecdotal dimensions. Thus, deciding on a set of survey measures to define aspirational voters is challenging.

Among aspirational voters Labor did particularly poorly in the 2004 election.

However, two questions asked in the AES stand out as directly relevant: income and attitude toward tax cuts. The survey does not ask for respondent's individual income, but it does ask about household income. Accordingly, I include respondents with household incomes in the middle forty per cent—that is, incomes between \$30,000 and \$70,000 per year—as the first step to defining the aspirational voter. The second step isolates from these middle income households all respondents who favoured tax cuts over increased government spending on social services. The pattern of voting is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. 'Aspirational voters', first preference vote, House of Representatives, 2004

Vote in House of Representatives	Coalition	Labor	Other	No. respondents*
	%	%	%	
Actual 2004 result	46	38	16	
All respondents AES 2004	51	37	12	1625
'Aspirationals'	63	28	9	253

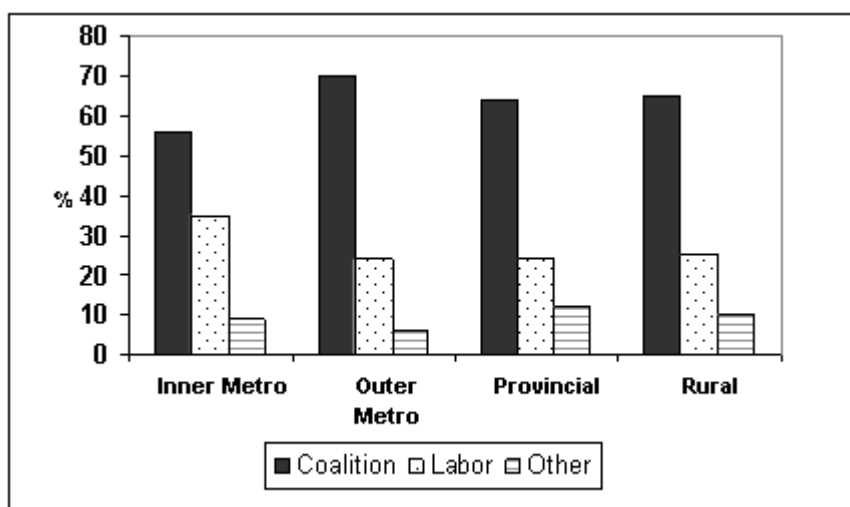
Source: Australian Election Study 2004 (Bean, C. et al. 2005)

*Includes only those respondents to AES 2004 who indicated how they voted in the House of Representatives.

The table indicates that 253, or sixteen per cent, of all respondents to AES 2004 were 'aspirational'. Although AES respondents favoured the Coalition Parties by five per cent more than the general electorate—suggesting a slight bias toward the Coalition in this sample survey—it is quite clear that among the aspirationals Labor did particularly poorly, with only 28 per cent support, compared to 63 per cent going to the Coalition.

The Australian Electoral Commission divides electorates into four categories, and among the sixteen per cent of the electorate defined as aspirational, four per cent lived in inner metropolitan and rural electorates, three per cent in inner metropolitan and two per cent in provincial. Figure 1 shows that a massive 70 per cent of aspirational voters supported the Coalition in the outer suburbs.

Figure 1. The ‘aspirational’ vote by electorate location, 2004



Source: Australian Election Study 2004 (Bean, C. et al. 2005) [computer file]

Although only fourteen per cent of AES 2004 respondents living in these outer suburbs are aspirationals, this is, nevertheless, a proportion large enough to play a determining part the outcome of contests in marginal seats.

Consider the example of the outer urban South Australian electorate of Kingston. In 2001 Labor's David Cox held the seat after out-polling his Liberal rival by about 1000 first preference votes, and ended up with a meagre 1.3 per cent two party preferred lead. In 2004 the tables were turned when the Liberal's Kym Richardson, with a similar first preference lead as enjoyed by Cox in 2001, eventually won by only 119 votes after the distribution of preferences. Kingston is now the Coalition Government's most marginal seat. This example highlights how only a small number of voters changing party preference can see a seat change hands. It is reasonable to postulate, given the strength of support the Coalition enjoyed among aspirational voters, that the aspirational vote helped the Coalition win not only Kingston but also the outer urban seat of Wakefield. More generally it helped to shore up the Coalition's vote in the outer suburbs across the nation.

Latham's identification of the 'aspirational voter' does point towards a new type of voter, albeit part of the broad middle class, from which both Labor and the Coalition parties must gain majority support if they are to win elections. Before the 2004 election the Coalition held six outer metropolitan marginal seats with an average margin of 2.6 per cent (the Australian Electoral Commission defines marginal as five or less percent). After the poll these same six seats were held comfortably by an average 6.3 per cent. Across the nation the Coalition enjoyed a four per cent improvement in its first preference vote compared to Labor's minus 0.7 in outer metropolitan electorates (Bennett et al 2005). At the next national election, due in 2007, the five most marginal Government-held seats are outer metropolitan and must be won by Labor as part of the fifteen seats it requires to form government. Understanding the needs of the aspirational voters and developing policy that appeals to this group is, it seems, a prerequisite for Labor winning office.

Aspirationals helped shore up the Coalition's vote in the outer suburbs across the nation.

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