Swinging Voters in the Electoral Landscape
– from the late 1960s to the present

By Haydon Manning

During election campaigns and for weeks after the result is done and dusted much commentary ensues over the question of what motivated voter choice. Election pundits often argue that compared to the past fewer voters are 'rusted on' to a party and consequently, with each election the army of 'swinging voters' grows. Swinging voters are often supposed to be cynical about party politics because they perceive little policy difference between Liberal and Labor. Are these reasonable observations and do they hold up to scrutiny when the results of questionnaires conducted over the last forty years are examined?

Sol Lebovic founded *Newspoll* in 1985 and is unquestionably one of the most authoritative observers of Australian political opinion. He argued recently that the divide between the political left and right has eroded because the 'worker versus capital' division is less relevant as an agent of political socialisation. As a result, the number of swinging voters grows.

'I get the feeling that we are seeing more voters flirting with a different party. Between 2001 and 2004 federal elections, the widest Newspoll two-party preferred voting intention difference was a 55-45 split. In the past 12 months we have seen this split grow to 61-39 per cent …More voters are swaying in the breeze; there appears to be a bigger pool of swinging voters. [1]

Moreover, for Lebovic, the absence of 'ideological differences' between the major parties fosters voter cynicism and, in turn, the parties respond with increasing the focus on selling the leader's credentials rather than policy. This simply engenders voter cynicism as political 'spin' replaces policy substance and steadfast leadership. Lebovic finds support for his views from among an illustrious and experienced group of social and political commentators. Renowned for his focus group studies aimed at tapping into the mood of the voter, Hugh Mackay appears frequently in the media commenting on the 'mood of the nation'. In the early

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1990s, at a time of economic recession he argued that 'Australians are trying to come to terms with the fact that the nature of politics itself has been redefined' and that this saw the public cynicism toward parties and government soar to such a level that, he concluded, 'it may well stimulate demand for some redefinitions of our political institutions.'[2] Influential political journalist Paul Kelly draws a similar conclusion to Mackay in 2000 when he observes that where 'people previously believed in government, they are now sceptical of government.' For Kelly this decline suggests that where 'people previously believed in at least some political leaders, today there is cynicism, mistrust or disgust with leaders and the political system itself.'[3] Adding to this picture, Michelle Grattan, journalist with *The Age* newspaper, observes that there is a 'growing distrust of, and disillusionment with, governments and governance' and that this is prompting a 'crisis of cynicism' among voters.[4]

These observations and Lebovic's hypothesis that swinging voters are growing in number appeal because they resonate with the fact that the ALP and Liberal Party's core voter constituencies have shifted over the last thirty years. This has obviously been the case for Labor as it confronted the numerical decline of the blue collar working class. This decline not only impacts adversely on the party's voter base but also its strong organisational and financial links to the union movement. Former Labor leader, Mark Latham, may have struggled to lead his party but his appreciation of the shifting electoral sands saw him argue that Labor must begin to appeal to the 'aspirational voters'. Many in this group came from working class families where supporting the Labor Party was the norm but as the economy transformed during the 1980s and 1990s Labor's appeal diminished as many tradesmen, who once worked for wages, embraced the prospect of higher incomes by setting up their own business. Associated with this was the growth of wealth for households as increasingly women entered the workforce and remained working full or part-time while raising children. The result was a genuine transformation of society away from the divide between working class and middle class life experiences. More people were accessing the so-called 'life chances' of the middle class and this impacted on voter attitudes

in a way that Latham figured Labor needed to come to terms with. He concluded that Labor must reorient its policy priorities and join the Liberals in supporting lower taxes and presenting Labor as a party also committed to low interest rates, something Howard had championed. Given that the 'aspirationals' carried historically high levels of personal and household debt the interest rate issue was particularly sensitive.

Thus, it may be argued that the Howard era was underpinned by voter support which, not unlike an earlier golden age under Robert Menzies, managed to lock in an essentially new middle class voter constituency identified by Latham and commentators as 'the aspirational class'. All things considered this group and the more working class group known as the 'Howard's Battlers' suggested a movement towards a more volatile electorate where loyalties to party were much less common than in the past.[5] This is an appealing analysis but on closer inspection a more nuanced picture emerges.

In a series of surveys of public opinion on political matters, political scientists have used the following question as the key measure of 'rusted-on-ness' or 'party identification' – *'Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as Liberal, Labor, National or what?'* Dean Jaensch argues that voters are steadily less inclined to say they identify with any party and this means that *'the political components of an electoral campaign become more effective – issues, leaders, events, images become crucial for voters, and for political parties.'*[6] It is certainly true that the campaign and the role of the leader is more prominent than ever but curiously, as the graphs indicate, party identification has not declined. Indeed, over forty years of surveys, it remains remarkably consistent with about 70 to 80 per cent of voters saying they 'identify'. Notwithstanding the intuitive appeal of the argument that party identification is in decline, the statistics suggest that little has changed.

Graphs one and two derive from the pioneering research on Australian voting and political behaviour conducted by Don Aitkin during the late 1960s and early 1970s. His comprehensive questionnaires forged a path for the regular post election surveys, most notably the *Australian Election Study (AES)* that began in 1987. Led by Professors Ian McAllister and Clive

Bean, the findings of each *AES* are reported widely by quality broadsheet newspapers and used by political scientists as the most authoritative source tracking opinion across a wide range of questions. Moreover, these surveys are the only comprehensive studies on political opinion and voting behaviour publicly available through the Australian National University's *Social Science Data Archives*. Using software supplied by the Data Archives, anyone can interrogate the data sets using cross tabulations and other sophisticated methods for studying political opinion.[7]

With regard to party identification Aitkin observed, from the basis of three surveys conducted between 1967 and 1979, that Australian voters' have 'relatively unchanging feelings of loyalty to one or another of the Australian parties.'[8] Assessing degrees of 'party identification' is one of the more enduring questions posed in surveys in Australia and other liberal democracies and we find that of Australian voters, a remarkably consistent three quarters are prepared to say they think of themselves as Labor, Liberal ,and so on. While it is the case that respondents indicating no party identification increased from about 10 to 15 per cent over the period this is very modest and certainly not evidence of any serious decline in 'rusted-on-ness'.

'Rusted-on-ness' or party identification is, as Dean Jaensch explains, 'a product of a combination of strong political socialisation in the family, the impact of social factors, and a clear tendency for the commitment to be transferred from one generation to another.'[9] Despite the decline of occupational class factors influencing voter choice it appears that voters remain prepared to say they 'identify' in similar proportions in 2007 as they did in 1967.
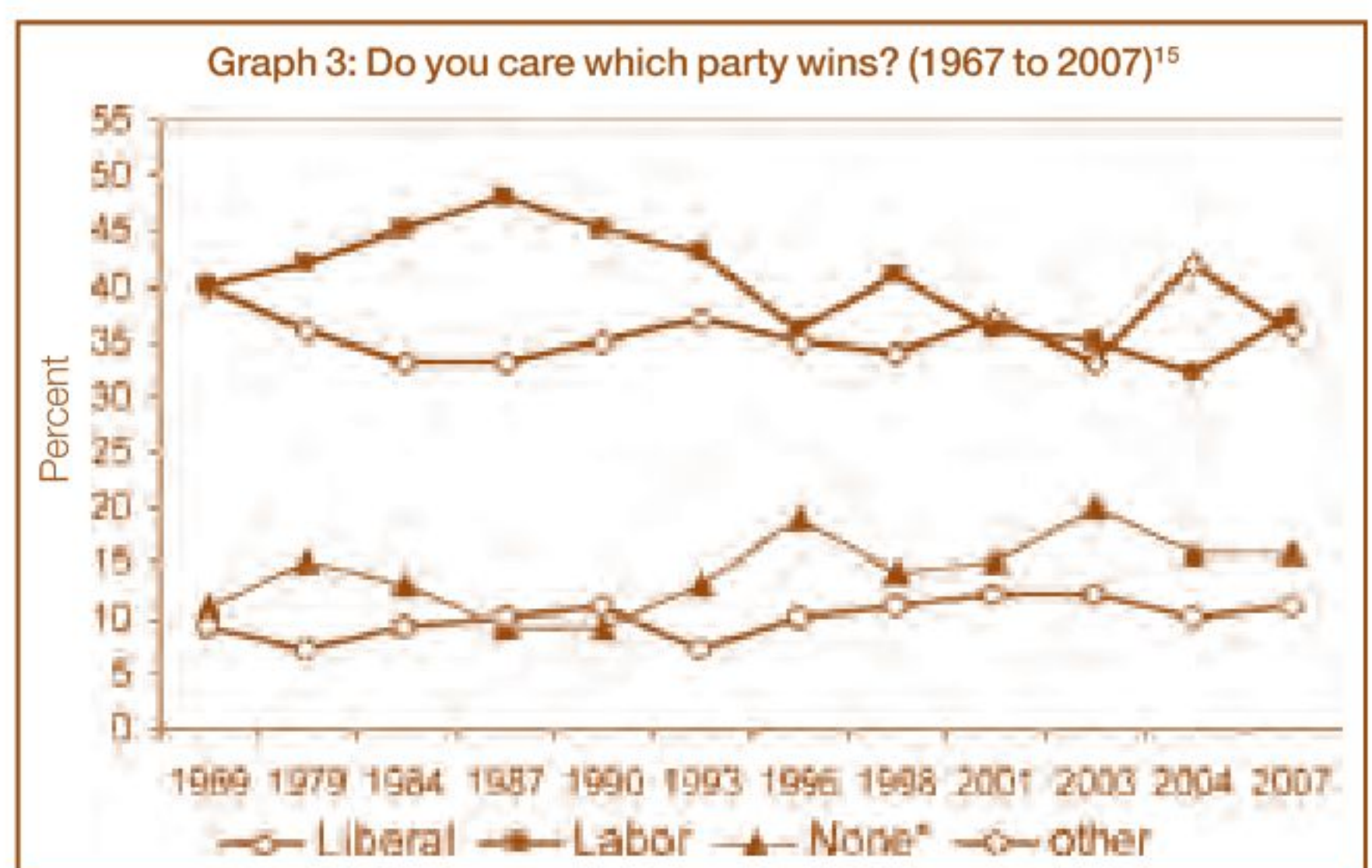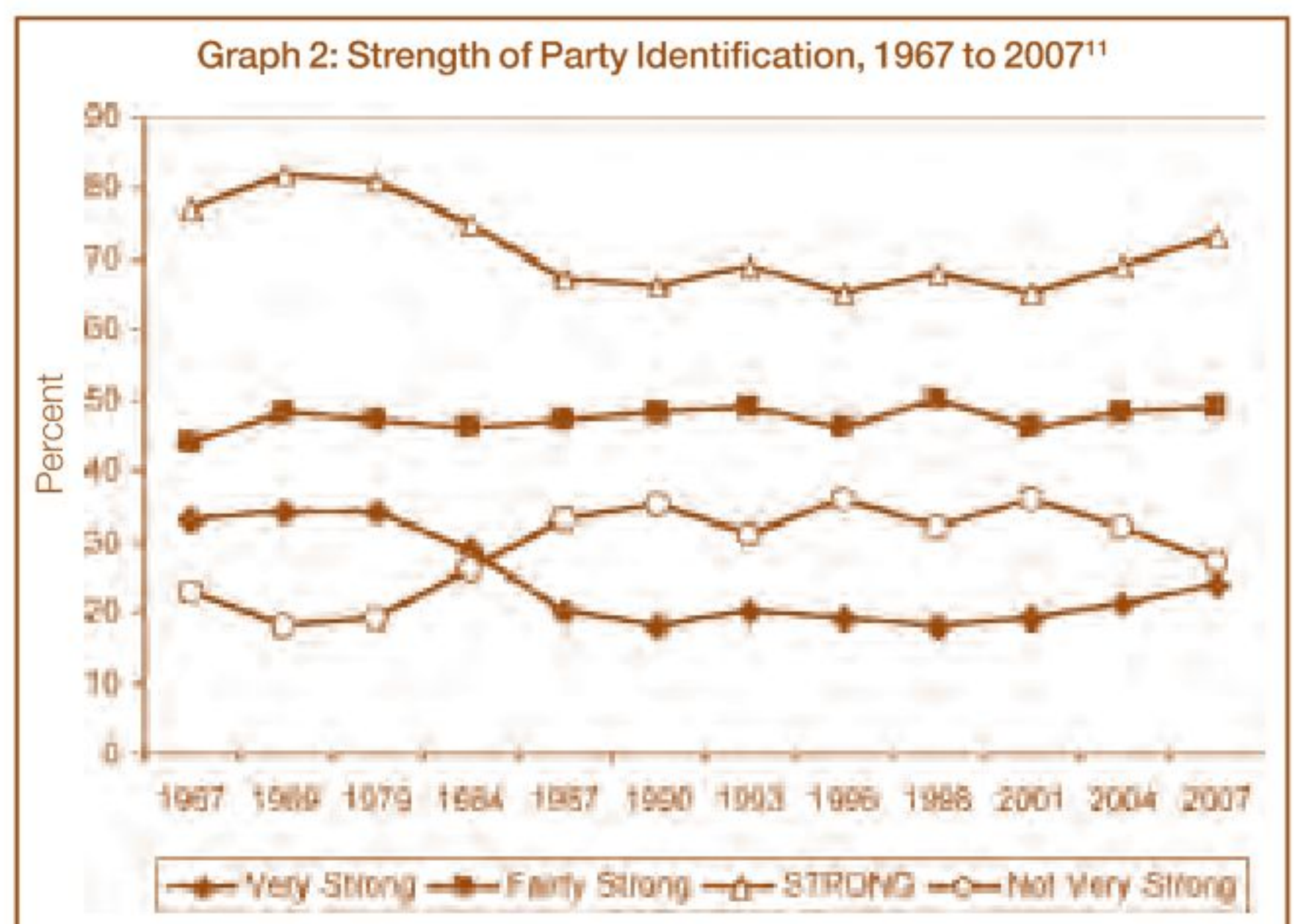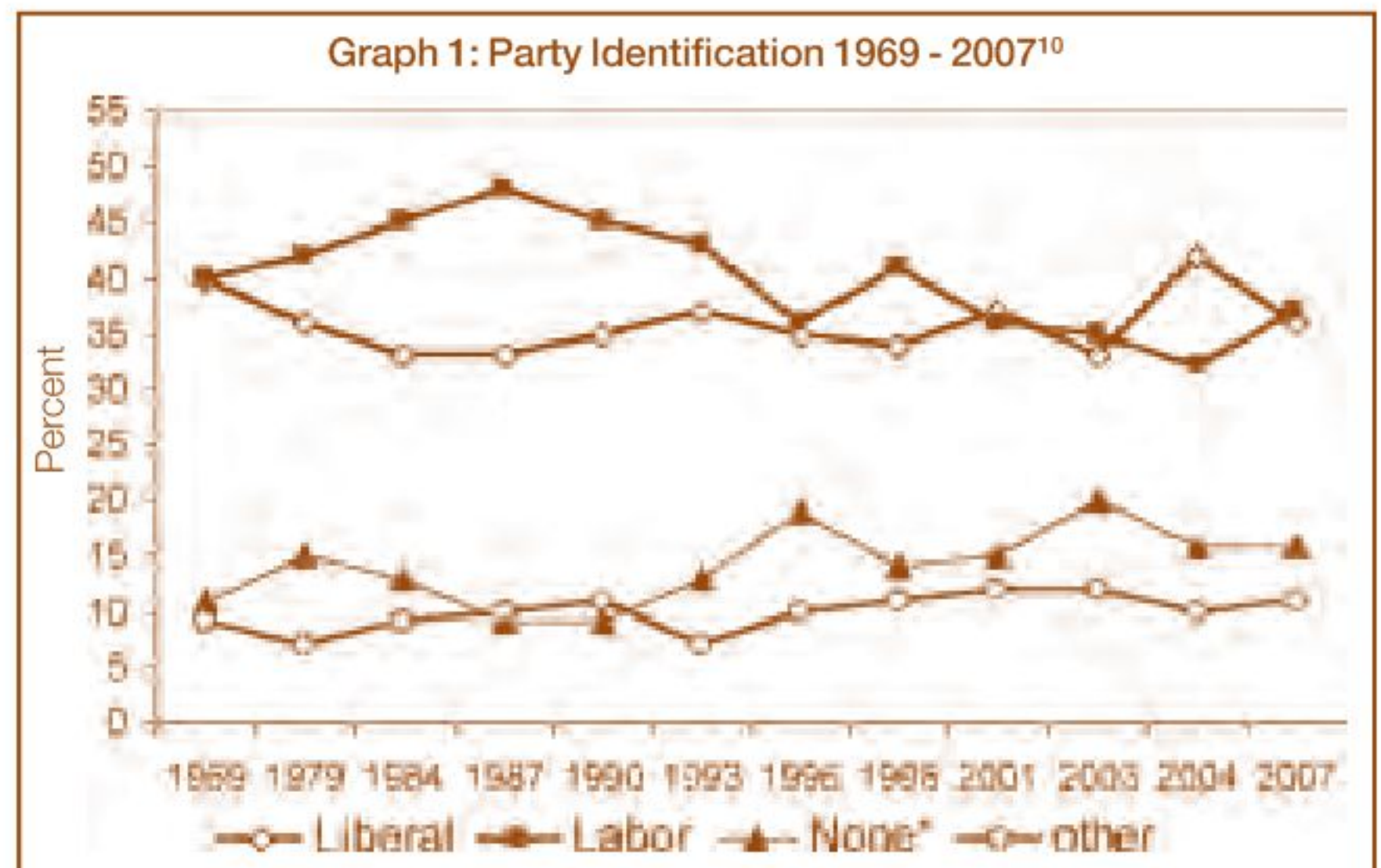
Clearly, care needs to be taken with interpreting the meaning conveyed by survey respondents saying that they think of themselves as Labor, Liberal and so on. When asked to reflect on their 'strength of identification' it is apparent that at least until 2001, a clear decline of those with 'very strong' identification appears. But when 'very' and 'fairly strong' responses are combined it is remarkable to find that over the forty years about two thirds of voters say that have a reasonably strong degree of party identification. *AES* surveys cannot offer a definitive answer on the
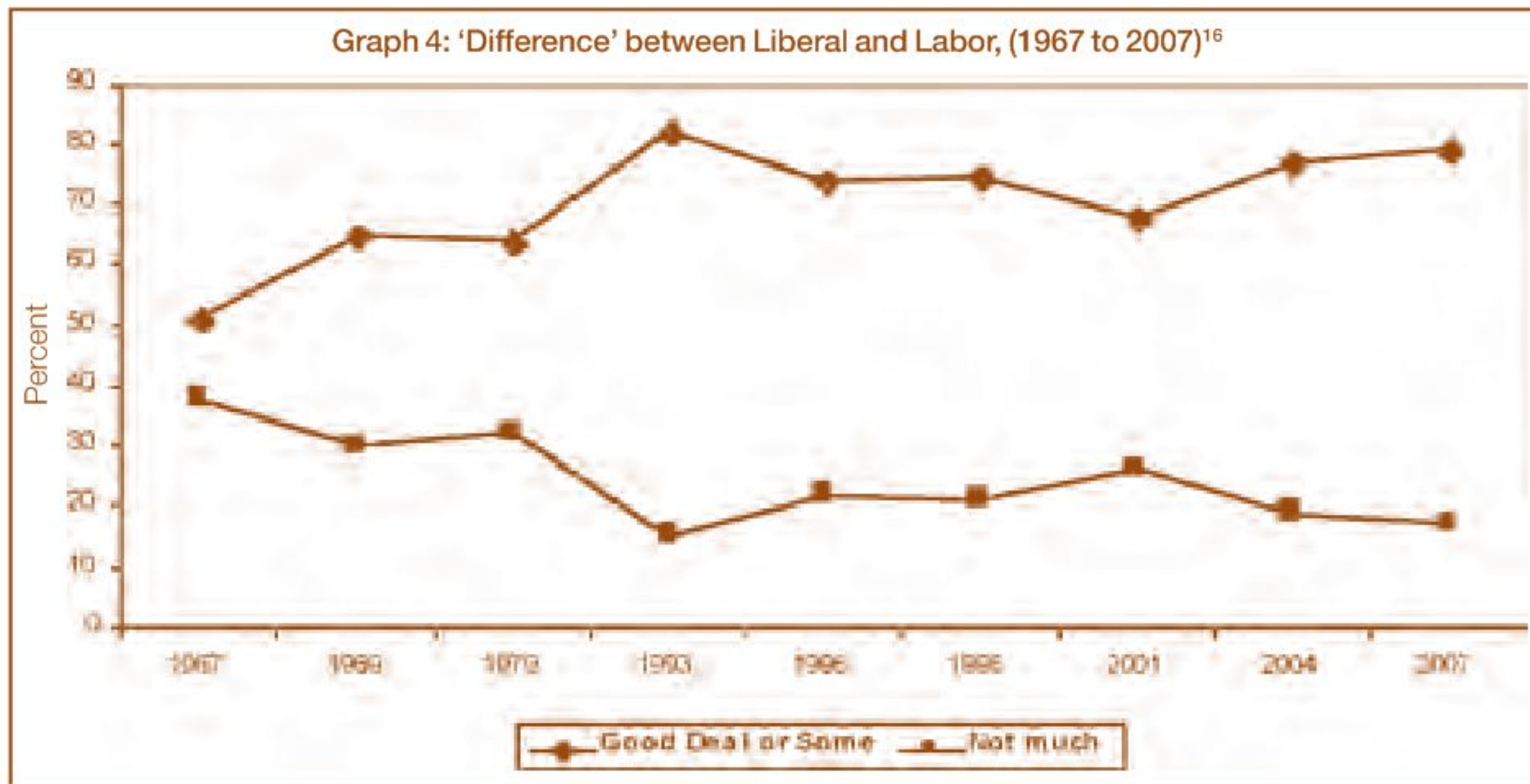
Graph 1: Party Identification 1969 - 2007[10]

question of voter cynicism but the fact that voters consistently state some party identification suggests cynicism may not be held particularly deeply.[12] Contrary to what one might expect, if public cynicism toward political parties is so rife, it appears that a longer-term 'identification' with a major political party remains a stronger feature of voting in Australia than in, for example, Europe or North America.[13]

The sharp break in the trend toward decreasing strength of identification since 2001 is puzzling and certainly not something that could be predicted by those who argue that voters are becoming more disenchanted with the major parties. Arguably, journalists, academics and the wider political class engaged in party politics – the so-called 'commentariat' - set too high a standard from which to judge the citizen voters' engagement with party and electoral politics. In so doing they fail to appreciate the respectable level of voter interest in politics, especially at election time. For example, the 2007 *AES* reports that three quarters of respondents stated they either 'Frequently' or 'Occasionally' discussed politics during the election campaign compared with one quarter 'rarely' or 'not at all'.[14] Graph 3 reports on whether or not voters 'care which party wins' and clearly shows that they do and have done so for decades.

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises concern voters' response to a question seeking their views on the differences between Labor and Liberal. Contrary to the assessment that the parties have converged as ideological disputes we find that this view is not shared by voters; at least this is the case when they are asked about their perception of differences between the parties.

Graph 2: Strength of Party Identification, 1967 to 2007[11]

Graph 3: Do you care which party wins? (1967 to 2007)[15]

Graph 4: 'Difference' between Liberal and Labor, (1967 to 2007)[16]

While not seeking a nuanced set of reflections on political values and ideology, Graph 4 reveals answers over four decades, to the relatively straightforward question, 'In general, would you say there was a good deal of difference between the parties, some difference, or not much difference?' The results are particularly interesting for they indicate that voters quite rightly perceived the genuine choice between the parties' policy platforms at the 1993 election. At this election Liberal leader John Hewson ran on a platform of strong market based economic reforms he called 'Fightback!', including a Goods and Services Tax and reforms to industrial relations akin to the Howard Government's 'WorkChoices' legislation. Objectively, the choice presented voters was among the starkest since 1966 and sees some 80 per cent say there was 'a good deal' or 'some' difference between the parties. The view that Australian democracy does not offer voters a genuine choice on election day is certainly questioned by the trend evident in Graph 4 where the proportion saying there is 'not much' difference falls from just under 40 per cent in 1967 to about 20 per cent in 2007.

Turning now to the swinging voters, we can begin by noting that any growth in their number is unlikely to be related to declining party identification or disenchantment with the parties due to a lack of choice. Some voters may change their party identification and, moreover, the duration of the period of this identification may generally be shorter today than in the past. The surveys have never asked respondents about whether they changed either their party identification, or how long they had identified. What we can safely conclude is that with relatively high levels of party identification the degree of swinging, or what is sometimes called, electoral volatility, is less than implied by Lebovic. However, the question remains, how should

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we measure the question of how many voters are likely to be swingers at any given election?

Between elections parties and candidates spend countless hours raising cash to spend on campaign advertising and, as election day approaches, a cacophony of views are propounded as to whether or not a 'swing' is in the air. Party strategists work overtime on wooing those they figure remain 'undecided' while the media speculates on whether the respective Party leaders' messages are 'cutting through' or gaining 'traction'. It is notoriously difficult to account for the proportion of voters who may be considered as 'swingers' at any one election, but there are a few useful avenues for exploring the question.

Conducted shortly after each national election the *Australian Election Study* asks respondents when they decided which party they were going to vote for and in 2007 a little over two-thirds reported that they had already decided before the election campaign began. This figure accords reasonably closely with the number of respondents who state that they 'identify' and

Table 1: When voters decided how to vote in Federal elections, (1990-2007)

	1990 %	1993 %	1996 %	1998 %	2001 %	2004 %	2007 %	Av %
Long time ago/before election announced	57	56	62	49	59	68	71	**60**
Beginning or During campaign	33	36	27	40	29	24	21	**30**
Election Day	10	8	11	11	12	8	8	**10**
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	

Table 2. Liberal, Labor and other party 'identifiers' who desert and vote for another party in the House of Representatives.[20]

	1967 %	1969 %	1979 %	1987 %	1990 %	1993 %	1996 %	1998 %	2001 %	2004 %	2007 %
Lib id [voted ALP or other]	11	25	10	18	12	9	9	17	11	13	12
ALP id [voted Lib or other]	16	11	16	9	18	16	16	15	15	12	9
Other Party id [voted Lib or Labor]	24	23	36	25	15	31	50	44	17	26	26

have either very or fairly strong party identification. Notably, the number of those making up their minds on election day seems well established at around 10 per cent, whereas those who say they make up their minds during the campaign averaged 30 per cent over the seven elections between 1990 and 2007. It is plausible to define a typical swinging voter as one who makes up their mind sometime during the campaign period through to election day. In summary, Table 1 indicates that, on average, about 40 per cent of voters are, on this measure, swinging voters.

This result sits somewhat awkwardly alongside the fact that about 75 per cent of voters say they have either 'strong' or 'very strong' party identification. Clearly there is a inconsistency between answers to the two questions, but one difficulty with the 'when decided to vote' question lies with it demanding that respondents reflect on their decision and here there is plenty of latitude for imprecision.

Recall that in Lebovic's view that swingers are on the increase because of variations in Newspoll's reporting of two-party preferred voting intention difference between 2001 and 2004. In essence what Lebovic is considering is the degree of volatility in the electorate. One way to measure the relative proportions of 'swinging' is to employ the so-called 'volatility index' first devised by Pedersen thirty years ago.[17] This measure does not rely on surveys, but rather, on actual election results. It simply compares the percentage first preference vote of each party at the most recent election to the election before, the differences are added up and divided by two to produce the 'volatility index'. According to this measure, the 1977 and 1987 were the most volatile with nearly double the volatility when compared with elections held during the current decade. Calculations by Murray Goot using this mathematical measure of volatility reveals that electoral volatility was far more pronounced at various elections from the 1920s to the 1940s than it has been since the 1980s, notwithstanding the attention paid in recent times to claims about a 'volatile electorate' and the role of swinging voters.[18] Updating Goot's research and taking the period 1969 to 2007, we find that average volatility is 6.7 per cent with the last three elections coming in close to the average.

Finally, an approach to defining swinging voters that centres on the question of party identification is offered as measure that gets to the heart of the matter. Arguably, a sound measure of the swinging voter would involve looking at two groups of voters;

1] The voter who states a party identification but then votes for another party, and;

2] voters who state that they have no party identification; this latter group Jaensch terms, 'floating voters.'[19]

With these definitions it is possible to measure swinging voters over the past forty years.

Table 3: Swinging Voters at House of Representatives Elections, (1967 to 2007)[21]

	1967 %	1969 %	1979 %	1987 %	1990 %	1993 %	1996 %	1998 %	2001 %	2004 %	2007 %
Deserter*	20	18	16	14	15	10	22	22	13	13	12
Floating Voter#	13	11	15	9	9	13	19	14	15	16	16

* Respondents with party identification who vote for another party   # voters with no party identification

As is often the case, care needs to be taken in designing any measure, but it is reasonable to consider those voters who state they have a 'party identification' but for some reason decide to vote in the lower house for a party other than their nominated 'identification' as evidence of a 'swinging voter'. The high Liberal desertion in 1969 is explained by disunity within their ranks and, on the other hand, the growing appeal of a reunited Labor Party under Gough Whitlam's leadership. Notable also are the low desertion rates for the victorious Party in 1996 and 2007 when the government changed hands. At any given election Liberal and Labor identifiers desert on average about 13 and 14 per cent respectively whereas voters with minor party identification are much more likely to vote other than their stated party identification with an average rate of desertion of 29 per cent, but it needs to be noted that overall this group is small as a proportion of all survey respondents.

Table 3 tracks the voting decisions of survey respondents who either deserted from their party identification or fall into the category of 'floating voter'.

Over the last three national elections the combination of 'floating voters' [(ie. those with no party identification) and 'deserters' allows one to estimate that about one quarter of the electorate are 'swinging voters', a figure substantially lower than the combination of those who make up their mind at some point during the campaign period. Notable also, and contrary to what one would expect if cynicism is likely to prompt desertion, is the lack of a trend of movement in any direction.

In conclusion, by looking carefully at a series of surveys covering 40 years of electoral history, a number of enduring views about voter attitudes are seen to be questionable. Importantly, this leads to the observation that less has changed in Australian politics, at least as viewed by the average voters, as distinct from those who comment for a living on politics, than first meets the eye. Voters are no doubt as vocal today as in the past in bemoaning the state of 'politics' but they are neither more cynical nor more

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apathetic. The expense the parties incur chasing the swinging voters will continue but the idea that spending vast sums on advertising party wares and craftily 'spinning' every policy announcement may be objectively only benefiting those who sell these 'services' to the parties. The vast majority of voters really don't need to be wooed by the dissonance of the campaign policy sales pitch but probably do need to be reminded of the core values in the party stands for. As for the swinging voters, representing somewhere between one quarter to two thirds of the electorate, the parties probably feel justified in spending ever greater sums of taxpayer funded and privately sourced funds to advertise their policy wares, celebrate their leader's virtues and lampoon their opponent's failings. This may not be a particularly edifying dimension of contemporary democratic politics but it is an inevitable feature of an adversarial party system. ❖

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