

Charnock, David (2005) Links between family structure and voting in Australia, in *Australasian Political Studies Association Conference*, Dunedin, New Zealand, 2005.

Links between family structure and voting in Australia

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Links between family structure and voting in Australia

Abstract

Some of the features of the 2004 Australian federal election campaign and outcomes raise the possibility that we might have seen the beginnings of a divide in voting behaviour based on family structure, particularly those aspects related to the presence or absence of children. In the light of ongoing demographic trends (such as low fertility rates and growth in single person households) this would be plausible and the issue certainly justifies some further investigation. Relevant data from the 2004 Australian Election Study is quite limited, so I use data from both the 2004 AES and the 2003 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes to explore the extent to which family structure currently appears to be associated with federal voting.

Links between family structure and voting in Australia

Introduction

Family status and structure has not traditionally been something considered as particularly salient in studies of Australian voting behaviour. There are some good reasons for this: survey-based electoral studies began at a time when marriage rates were historically at a very high level and desires to have children were relatively uniform, if not almost a social norm; also, the cross-sectional voting studies that have been generally carried out have some inherent drawbacks, compared to longitudinal studies, in examining this topic.

There is, nevertheless, indirect evidence that points to some related historical influences on voting. The well-established patterns of social residential differentiation in Australian cities virtually always incorporate a component that reflects family status and structure (see Logan et al 1975 for example). Consequently, studies that show, for example, spatial differences in voting behaviour within metropolitan areas could at least partly be interpreted in terms of family status, although this has not generally been the way in which the patterns have been explained (see, for example, Kemp (1978: chapter 4) who focuses on class and social mobility as the underlying factors).

Whether or not an interpretation concentrating on class and social mobility was correct at the time Kemp was writing, demographic features in relation to families have changed considerably in the last few decades: divorce rates are high, much larger proportions of births occur outside marriage, non-heterosexual and de facto relationships have been incrementally given degrees of legal recognition, fertility rates have declined considerably, and the extent of lifetime childlessness has significantly increased. Some of these aspects have had political associations (e.g. extensions of rights for de facto and non-heterosexual relationships), with some consequent electoral impacts (cf. Jupp and Sawer

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1994, for example). More recently, statements about policies being 'good for Australian families' have become common amongst the major parties, although in this case the view of 'family' often appears to be a fairly restricted one.

It would be easy to dismiss the emphasis on families as nothing more than customary political rhetoric, but there are some reasons to think that it should be taken more seriously and should at least be subjected to some exploratory investigation. The potential political significance was brought to the fore at the 2004 Australian federal election by the emergence of the Family First Party (FFP). Although FFP obtained only 1.76% of the Senate vote nationally, the party did win a Senate seat in Victoria as a result of preferences from other parties. Despite the Coalition's having a Senate majority in its own right from 1 July 2005, this FFP seat could still be of practical importance at times and will certainly help to keep the party and its policies at the forefront of media attention.

One of the most important aspects of the background to this is that fertility rates in Australia have now been below replacement level for almost 30 years. Even with ongoing immigration levels that are relatively high by international standards, this will shortly begin to result in profound impacts on the labour force, because of the consequential changes in the age structure of the population and the large size of the 'baby boomer' cohort. Various policy changes have begun to be implemented to respond to these impacts and some of these are (either directly or indirectly) relevant to the cost of raising children. However, I have been unable to find relevant data on the direct impact of these particular policies on voting and so I will initially concentrate here on a more indirect approach, based on examining the nature of any associations between household structure (including the number of children) and voting behaviour.

Naturally, drawing conclusions is made difficult because factors such as age, education, income, occupation, religion and workforce participation all play some role in influencing both fertility levels and voting behaviour. The fact that interpretations of the emergence of parties like FFP generally concentrate on

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religious connections and put them in a similar group to the Christian Democratic Party (CDP)¹ is a good illustration of this. It will therefore be extremely unlikely that an initial examination will be able to resolve the causal relationship between fertility and voting. However, with suitable data, it should be possible to at least describe some aspects of the relationship and attempt to draw some tentative conclusions about causes.

For a number of reasons, it would be expected that one of the most critical divisions would revolve around the presence or absence of children. Recent estimates (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003) indicate that lifetime childlessness levels among Australian women² currently in their childbearing years (taken as between 15 and 44 years of age) will be about 25 per cent i.e. about a quarter of women presently in that age group will never have any children. This proportion has been increasing for over three decades, beginning with women born immediately post-WWII (Rowland 1998). The level for women born between 1930 and 1946 was the lowest in the 20th century, at only 9 per cent (Rowland 1998).

While this is not the place for a detailed discussion of all of the possible reasons for this trend³, one of the most important possible explanations in the electoral context is that of financial cost. Although there are different approaches to measuring the direct costs of maintaining children (see, for example, Family Court of Australia 2004) and those costs vary with factors like the age of the child and the number of children in the family, evidence suggests that for families on average income levels the average cost is around 15 per cent of gross (i.e. pre-tax) family income for one child and 35 per cent for three children (Percival and Harding 2000)⁴. For high income families the costs have historically been largely met from private sources, while low income families have been much more heavily dependent on public expenditure in the form of cash transfers.

For a more complete account of the financial costs of having children, the loss of potential income, from reduced participation of one or both parents in the labour

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force and lower levels of career progression, must be added where necessary. For some individuals and families, especially those with higher levels of income earning capacity, these 'opportunity costs' can be considerably larger than the direct costs.

These types of direct and indirect costs have political relevance, since many of the corresponding issues can be the subject of policy responses. However, it is clear that the decision to have children (or not) is not merely a financial one. In discussing the non-financial aspects of the decision-making process, some demographers (see van de Kaa 2001, for example) have drawn on the ideas of Inglehart (1977,1997) to argue that value changes must be considered as important, especially in the so-called 'second demographic transition' (see Surkyn and Lesthaeghe 2004).

Of course, most political scientists will be familiar with these notions, because there are parallel arguments in the area of voting behaviour and the development of new parties. However, in the electoral field there are indications that the correlations between economic and other attitudinal dimensions are such that there is a reduced practical impact on the structure of party competition (Charnock and Ellis 2003, 2004; Kitschelt 1995). If this finding extends to voluntary lifetime childlessness, then one would anticipate a probable association with voting for parties on the left of the political spectrum.

Overall, then, there are two main aspects that require investigation. One refers to the material issue of the costs of raising children. The other refers to more intangible differences of values related to children and family structures. As far as is possible with the available data, I will explore both of these aspects.

Data and Methods

The series of Australian Election Studies have very little data relevant to studying this topic. They contain a standard question about current marital status but, with

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the exception of the 1993 AES (which asks about the presence of children attending various levels of educational institution), have no questions that explore family or household structure in more detail⁵. The 2003 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (Gibson *et al* 2004) is a useful alternative since it has data on household composition as well as current marital status and also asked a quite large range of questions on related topics (such as attitudes towards aspects of parenting and various kinds of family types). On the negative side, however, the fieldwork for AuSSA 2003 was carried out a long time before the 2004 federal election, well before many of the 'family friendly' policies were put into the public arena. Also, of course, as far as voting information is concerned, only data on voting intentions at the time of the AuSSA fieldwork are available, unlike for the AES which is conducted immediately after the election. Nevertheless, the data should be adequate for the purposes of an exploratory examination of the effects of family structure.

The sampling methods and data collection techniques used in the two surveys are essentially the same, though the AuSSA had a much larger completed sample size (4270)⁶ than did the 2004 AES (1769). Unfortunately for my purposes here, neither has any questions about either desired or expected number of children and so we can only make use of the current household composition information from the AuSSA. This is, of course, inevitably partially confounded with age.

As far as methods of analysis are concerned, I shall begin by examining the AuSSA data on voting intentions, marital status and household composition with the use of two- and three-way (controlling for age) crosstabulations. Following this, I devise two scales that measure attitudes towards parenting and families and analyse their relationships with voting intentions for the House of Representatives. These scales are derived from the AuSSA section about Families and Relationships. One set of items in this section was mainly concerned with measuring respondents' attitudes towards children and parenting. The specific questions were as follows:

Thinking about relationships and children today, please tell us how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements

- [v106] Children should be the main concern when couples consider divorce
- [v107] People who want children ought to get married
- [v108] A father should be as heavily involved with the care of his children as the mother
- [v109] The law should recognise same-sex relationships
- [v110] A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works
- [v111] Single parent can bring up children as well as a couple
- [v112] A life without children is not fully complete
- [v113] If the care is good, it's fine for children under 3yrs of age to be placed in full-time child care

Responses were on a five point scale, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

Another set of items measured perceptions of the meaning of 'family', including an exploration of whether the presence of children was perceived as an essential component⁷. The specific questions were as follows:

Generally speaking, which of the following living arrangements would you consider to be a family today

- [v114] A married couple with children
- [v115] An unmarried couple with children
- [v116] A same-sex couple with children
- [v117] A single parent with children
- [v118] A married couple without children
- [v119] An unmarried couple without children
- [v120] A same-sex couple without children

I used responses to the two sets of items to form two scales, each of which was standardized to lie within a range of 0-1, with high scores on the Family scale corresponding to the most broad interpretation of 'family' and high scores on the Parenting scale corresponding to agreement with the least traditional /conservative responses⁸.

Finally, using data from the AES 2004, I will discuss the results of a multilevel model for House of Representatives voting that incorporates both individual and divisional variables. This allows me to address the geographic differences

associated with family status mentioned previously in a manner that (i) controls simultaneously for the effects of many variables and (ii) allows for an examination of the potential contextual impact of family structure.

Results and Discussion

As anticipated, the relationship between current marital status and vote intention is quite weak (see Table 1). One of the most notable features is the over-representation among Green voters of Singles and those living with partners (with an offsetting under-representation of the Widowed). Levels of support for the ALP show only small variations with marital status; those for the Coalition vary much more, however, with the Married and Widowed being over-represented.

Table 1: Relationship between Marital/Partner Status and Vote intention

Vote intention in H of Reps	Single, never married	Living with partner	Married	Divorced or Separated	Widowed	Total
Coalition	37%	34%	49%	36%	52%	1701 46%
ALP	36%	41%	36%	41%	40%	1385 37%
Aust Dems	7%	5%	3%	6%	1%	150 4%
Greens	17%	18%	7%	11%	2%	328 9%
One Nation	3%	3%	4%	5%	5%	158 4%
Total	487 100%	238 100%	2445 100%	319 100%	233 100%	3722 100%

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

Some of these features are obviously age-related (e.g. the over-representation of singles among Green voters), but a detailed examination (see Table 2) of the interactions with age also shows some interesting aspects. Given that the Married group is easily the largest (about 65% of respondents), probably the most practically important such aspect is the fact that only 43% of those married

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and in the 35-49 age group intended to vote for the Coalition, a noticeably smaller proportion than that of the married in other age groups. This is also, of course, the age group most immediately affected by policies related to children and associated social expenditure, and this suggests that there should be

Table 2: Effect of Marital/Partner Status and Age on Vote Intention

Vote intention in H of Reps	Single, never married				Living with partner				Married				Divorced or Separated				Widowed				Total			
	Age Group				Age Group				Age Group				Age Group				Age Group				Age Group			
	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 and over	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 and over	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 and over	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 and over	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 and over	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 and over
Coalition	38%	35%	30%	42%	34%	34%	32%	46%	49%	43%	52%	55%	50%	31%	38%	37%	50%	67%	61%	49%	42%	40%	49%	52%
ALP	33%	36%	48%	35%	40%	41%	47%	31%	31%	40%	34%	36%	36%	43%	40%	44%	0%	33%	32%	42%	34%	40%	36%	38%
Aust Dems	7%	10%	2%	3%	6%	5%	4%	0%	4%	5%	3%	2%	0%	9%	6%	4%	0%	0%	0%	2%	6%	6%	3%	2%
Greens	18%	18%	16%	6%	21%	16%	14%	15%	13%	8%	6%	3%	7%	13%	9%	11%	0%	0%	5%	2%	17%	10%	7%	4%
One Nation	3%	2%	5%	13%	0%	4%	4%	8%	2%	4%	4%	5%	7%	4%	7%	5%	50%	0%	2%	5%	3%	4%	5%	5%
N	287	123	44	31	86	79	57	13	204	813	874	532	14	113	131	57	2	3	41	182	593	1131	1147	815

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

something to be discovered by a more direct analysis of the nature of the relationship between voting and household composition.

Table 3: Relationship between Household Composition and Vote Intention

Vote intention in H of Reps	Household Composition					Total
	1 adult, 0 children	1 adult, 1+ children	2 adults, 0 children	2 adults, 1-2 children	2 adults, 3+ children	
Coalition	43%	25%	51%	46%	43%	47%
ALP	39%	48%	34%	36%	42%	36%
Aust Dems	3%	8%	3%	6%	4%	4%
Greens	10%	18%	8%	8%	7%	9%
One Nation	5%	3%	4%	4%	4%	4%
	811	80	1254	579	162	2886
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

I alluded earlier to the possible primary role that might be expected to be played by the presence or absence of children. Direct data for studying this is available in AuSSA through a question that allows current household composition to be examined. However, this does not, of course, address the issue of lifetime childlessness (or, more generally, of expected or desired numbers of children) and so it is probably not surprising that Table 3 shows that the relationship between Household composition and vote intention is also weak, no stronger overall than that between vote and marital status.

However, there is one main feature that is quite significant. This is the way in which voting levels for the respective major parties alter as the number of

Table 4: Effect of Household Composition and Age on Vote Intention

Vote intention in H of Reps	1 adult 0 children				1 adult, 1+ children				2 adults, 0 children				2 adults, 1-2 children			2 adults, 3+ children		Total			
	Age Group				Age Group				Age Group				Age Group			Age Group		Age Group			
	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 and over	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 and over	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 and over	18-34	35-49	50-64	18-34	35-49	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 and over
Coalition	41%	34%	42%	49%	21%	20%	43%	52%	37%	53%	54%	43%	46%	49%	42%	44%	46%	40%	50%	52%	
ALP	36%	40%	40%	38%	50%	47%	50%	21%	36%	33%	37%	39%	37%	30%	38%	42%	32%	39%	35%	37%	
Aust Dems	5%	7%	2%	2%	0%	10%	7%	3%	6%	3%	2%	6%	6%	3%	4%	4%	4%	6%	3%	2%	
Greens	17%	16%	10%	5%	21%	22%	0%	22%	14%	6%	2%	11%	7%	9%	4%	7%	16%	11%	7%	3%	
One Nation	2%	4%	6%	6%	7%	2%	0%	1%	6%	5%	5%	2%	4%	9%	13%	3%	2%	4%	5%	5%	
Total	66	164	236	333	14	51	14	149	174	508	412	127	378	69	24	135	380	902	829	748	

Note: Some columns, with a total of 2 or fewer respondents, have been omitted from this table

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

children present increases. Whether only one or two adults are present, the pattern is that ALP voting levels increase as the number of children increases (from 36% to 42% for two adult households and from 39% to 48% for one adult households) and, conversely, voting levels for the Coalition decrease as the number of children increases (51% to 43% and 43% to 25%, respectively).

Some of the aspects associated with minor party (especially Green) voting become clearer when interactions with age are studied by further subdividing by age group (see Table 4). Voting intention levels for the Greens are higher in the age groups up to age 50 among single adult households (both with and without children) and two adult households without children than among households with two adults and children. The high level of Coalition support among two adult households without children in the 18-34 age group (52%) is also noteworthy. It is quite likely that both of these features are associated with the kind of value differences that I referred to above as having been considered in some of the demographic literature.

Table 5: Relationships between Vote Intention and Attitudes towards Family Types and Parenting Issues

Vote Intention in H of Reps	Mean score on Family scale	Mean score on Parenting scale
Coalition	.58 (750)	.40 (1566)
ALP	.65 (588)	.45 (1260)
Aust Dems	.70 (60)	.50 (141)
Greens	.75 (147)	.53 (302)
One Nation	.52 (75)	.38 (148)
Overall mean N	.62 (1620)	.43 (3417)

Note: Numbers within brackets indicate the number of respondents

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

Table 6: Relationships between Vote Intention and Attitudes towards Family Types and Parenting Issues by Age Groups

Vote Intention in H of Reps	Mean score on Family scale					Mean score on Parenting scale				
	Age Group					Age Group				
	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 and over	Total	18-34	35-49	50-64	65 and over	Total
Coalition	.68 (109)	.65 (206)	.56 (240)	.47 (182)	.58 (737)	.49 (222)	.44 (432)	.38 (526)	.32 (372)	.40 (1552)
ALP	.67 (83)	.70 (195)	.65 (185)	.54 (117)	.65 (580)	.50 (191)	.48 (415)	.44 (380)	.37 (262)	.45 (1248)
AustDems	.77 (15)	.73 (27)	.69 (11)	.43 (7)	.70 (60)	.57 (32)	.51 (60)	.45 (33)	.42 (16)	.50 (141)
Greens	.79 (48)	.73 (50)	.76 (35)	.62 (11)	.75 (144)	.60 (92)	.52 (100)	.51 (79)	.39 (26)	.53 (297)
ONP	.48 (6)	.57 (27)	.56 (19)	.41 (20)	.52 (72)	.43 (15)	.44 (40)	.39 (49)	.30 (41)	.38 (145)
Overall mean N	.70 (261)	.68 (505)	.61 (490)	.49 (337)	.62 (1593)	.51 (552)	.47 (1047)	.41 (1067)	.34 (717)	.43 (3383)

Note: numbers within brackets indicate the number of respondents.

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

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An analysis of how the two attitude scales discussed earlier vary with vote intention provides a more direct method of studying the effects of such value differences, and shows some very revealing results (see Table 5). Although the average scores for each party's voters on the Family scale are consistently higher (by between 0.14 and 0.22) than those on the Parenting scale, the ordering of those intending to vote for the respective political parties is the same in both instances viz. One Nation, Coalition, ALP, Australian Democrats, Greens. This is exactly the same ordering as discovered for the 1998 and 2001 elections in analyzing the effect of postmaterialism and postmodern attitudes on voting at those elections and discussed in Charnock and Ellis (2003; 2004). This indicates that any suggestion that children might become the source of a new division relevant to voting is likely to be considerably over-stated. Rather, it appears that it provides another manifestation of an already identified pattern.

For the Parenting scale, the pattern of change with age (see Table 6) is mainly one of steadily increasing conservatism in older age groups. Since this is essentially the same for all parties, the order of the parties on the scale within each age group remains basically unchanged. For the Family scale, some of the minor party subgroup samples are too small to be able to draw reliable conclusions but, as with the Parenting scale, there is no significant difference between the attitudes of ALP and Coalition supporters in the 18-34 age group. Greens voters' attitudes show no significant variation up to age 65, whereas Coalition voters decrease earlier (from age 50) and ALP patterns are similar to those of the Greens. Bearing in mind the cross-sectional nature of the data, one might nevertheless reasonably interpret this as an indication of value changes in this area having occurred a decade or two later among Coalition voters.

This is about as far as we can go with these examinations of data from the AuSSA that explore direct associations between voting and marital status, numbers of children, and attitudes towards parenting and families. A more indirect approach involves using multilevel modelling to investigate whether there is evidence of any related contextual effects. I have done this for data from the 2004 Australian Election Study and, although my concern here is with the

TABLE 7
INDIVIDUAL- AND DIVISIONAL-LEVEL EXPLANATORY VARIABLES USED

Individual level		
Occupation (Base: Non-manual)	MANUAL FARMING	Manual occupation Farming occupation
Sex (Base: Female)	MALE	Male
Class Self-Identification (Base: Working class)	MIDCL	Self-assessed middle class
Employer Sector (Base: Private employee)	SELFEM GOVEM	Self employed Government employee
Labour Force Status (Base: Employed)	UNEMP RETIRE HOUSEK OCCOTH	Unemployed in the previous week Retired Keeping house in the previous week Other employment in previous week
Highest qualification (Base: No post-school qualification)	DEGREE TECHQUAL	Degree or higher qualification Technical or diploma qualification
Age (Base: Aged 30-44 years)	YOUNG MIDDLE OLD	Aged 29 years or less Aged 45-59 years Aged 60 years or over
Union member (Base: No)	UNIONMEM	Union member
Annual Family Income (Base: \$30,001-\$50,000)	INCOM1 INCOM2 INCOM4 INCOM5	Family income up to \$15,000 Family income \$15,001-\$30,000 Family income \$50,001-\$90,000 Family income over \$90,000
Country of Birth (Base: Australian-born)	UKBORN EUROPNAM OTHOSEAS	Born in UK or Ireland Born in Europe or North America Born elsewhere overseas
Religious Denomination (Base: Anglican/C of E)	CATHOLIC UNITING PRESBYTN OTHRELIG NORELIG	Roman Catholic Uniting/Methodist Presbyterian Other religion No religion
Religious Attendance (Base: Less than yearly or Never)	ATTEND1 ATTEND2 ATTEND3	Attends religious service at least monthly Attends religious service several times a year Attends religious service at least once a year
Place of Residence (size) (Base: Major City (over 100,000))	RURAL CNTRYSM CNTRYLRG TOWNLRG	Resides in rural area or village Resides in small country town (under 10,000 people) Resides in larger country town (over 10,000 people) Resides in a large town (over 25,000 people)
Divisional Level		
DIVUNEMP	Divisional unemployment rate (%) at 2001 Census	
DIVAGRFF	Divisional % employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing at 2001 Census	
DIVMOBIL	Divisional residential mobility rate (% resident in 2001 at different address to 5 years before)	
DIV2PARS	Divisional % of families with two parents and offspring at 2001 Census	

TABLE 8
Multilevel model for ALP v Coalition vote:
2004 House of Representatives election

Variable	Estimate (s.e.)
Individual level	
Constant	-1.50 (0.34)*
MANUAL	0.42 (0.16)*
FARMING	-1.06 (0.58)*
MALE	-0.04 (0.14)
MIDCL	-0.42 (0.15)*
SELFEM	-0.34 (0.17)*
GOVEM	0.38 (0.15)*
UNEMP	1.03 (0.42)*
HOUSEK	0.59 (0.22)*
RETIRE	0.46 (0.21)*
OCCOTH	0.44 (0.34)
TECHQUAL	-0.37 (0.16)*
DEGREE	-0.01 (0.17)
YOUNG	0.22 (0.26)
MIDDLE	0.78 (0.21)*
OLD	0.62 (0.23)*
UNIONMEM	0.94 (0.15)*
INCOM1	0.27 (0.28)
INCOM2	0.61 (0.22)*
INCOM4	-0.02 (0.20)
INCOM5	-0.08 (0.23)
UKBORN	0.10 (0.22)
EUROPNAM	0.24 (0.32)
OTHOSEAS	0.20 (0.23)
CATHOLIC	0.60 (0.18)*
PRESBYTN	0.22 (0.31)
UNITING	0.61 (0.23)*
OTHRELIG	0.55 (0.24)*
NORELIG	0.96 (0.19)*
ATTEND1	-0.23 (0.18)
ATTEND2	-0.15 (0.21)
ATTEND3	-0.15 (0.22)
RURAL	-0.72 (0.25)*
CNTRYSML	-0.38 (0.24)
CNTRYLRG	-0.26 (0.28)
TOWNLRG	-0.13 (0.19)
Divisional level	
DIVUNEMP	-0.01 (0.08)
DIVAGRFF	-0.12 (0.09)
DIVMOBIL	-0.05 (0.10)
DIV2PARS	-0.19 (0.08)*
DIVOSEAS	0.01 (0.10)

Note: Effects are from a two-level bivariate logistic regression of the data from the 2004 Australian Election Study, with individuals as level 1 and electoral divisions as level 2. Base

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categories for the individual-level variables are given in Table 7. Positive effects indicate increased odds of voting for the ALP *vis a vis* the Coalition. An asterisk (*) indicates statistical significance at a 0.05 level.

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divisional level effects, for the sake of completeness and interest I have included results of the complete estimated model (see Tables 7 and 8). As compared to the AuSSA analyses, using the AES has the advantage of dealing with actual vote in 2004 (as compared to vote intention in 2003) but, on the other hand, the smaller sample size means that for technical reasons only voters for the ALP and Coalition are included in the analyses.

The most intriguing finding here is that the divisional level effect that refers to the proportion of families with two parents and offspring is the only one that is statistically significant. This is the first time since 1980 that it has been found to have a significant effect on ALP v Coalition voting (Charnock 2004). Moreover, at that time it favoured the ALP, whereas in 2004 it favoured the Coalition. Because the 2004 AES asked no questions about numbers of children in families, it is not possible to be completely sure of the extent to which this significant effect is a result of compositional differences at the individual level or of a contextual effect that occurred on top of individual level ones. My judgement, based on the AuSSA evidence in Table 3, and the fact that it was the first time for almost a quarter of a century that the divisional variable had been significant, is that both are probably present. Whichever is the case, however, influences on voting at the 2004 election definitely had some historically unusual features related to family structure.

Conclusion

Data limitations mean that some of this work (especially the parts about marital status and the presence of children) should only be regarded as being exploratory. Nevertheless, the results of the multilevel analyses (based on the AES) presented above do indicate that aspects related to family structure played an unaccustomed role at the 2004 election. Once the effects of various other socio-demographic and socioeconomic factors are allowed for, the overall influence of living in areas with more traditional family structures favoured the Coalition for the first time for at least 30 years. This might be a response to particular election-specific issues or it might

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indicate the beginning of a longer lasting feature. The extent to which each of these is the case is impossible to assess reliably with the available data.

The conclusions about the relationship between vote and household composition based on AuSSA 2003 analyses are also limited by the data, but there are some interesting findings, including ones that show some of the interactions with age. A main finding is that ALP voting levels increase as the number of children present increases (and conversely for the Coalition); this is likely to be a result of the ALP's traditional stance on areas of social expenditure such as education and health, where public expenditure can be a significant part of related costs for families.

However, the most clearcut finding from the AuSSA analyses is that when attitudes towards family types and parenting issues are examined, their association with voting shows essentially the same pattern as has been previously demonstrated for several other so-called 'indices of postmodernism' (Charnock and Ellis 2003). An immediate consequence is that they add little to our understanding of the structure of party competition in Australia. At first sight, this might seem surprising, given the degree of focus during the 2004 campaign on 'family friendly' policies. However, a similar conclusion was also reached about attitudes towards defence and terrorism and cultural pluralism at the 2001 election, although related issues had seemed to be important in that election context.

In spite of the previously mentioned correlation between the two dimensions, I think the consistency of the structure in the face of such different campaign contexts is best understood in the light of the argument of both Charnock and Ellis (2004) and Western and Tranter (2001) that the main source of differentiation between ALP and Coalition voting lies in economic issues, whereas voters for minor parties tend to be more clearly defined by their position on a postmaterialist/postmodern dimension. If I am right about this, then I would expect the same structure to be apparent at the next election, but campaign issues to depend on contemporary circumstances and agenda-setting by one or other of the ALP and the Coalition. These might, of course,

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include material issues in relation to children, but there is little evidence at this stage to think that a significant new cleavage defined along those lines has become established.

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NOTES

¹ Aggregate voting patterns provide some support for this, with FFP Senate votes at the 2004 election tending to be higher when CDP votes were lower (and vice versa).

² Demographers' study of fertility levels has traditionally been almost solely focussed on those of women, because of issues of reliability and availability of data, and the shorter and more well-defined reproductive span.

³ This is a complex issue, since childlessness is not infrequently an unintended outcome (Merlo and Rowland 2000; Fisher and Charnock (2003).

⁴ Note that these do not include non-cash public expenditures (e.g. on education and hospitals).

⁵ There is little evidence in the 1993 AES of voting patterns at that time being different for respondents with no children.

⁶ This is the total completed sample size. Some sets of questions in AuSSA (including some of those discussed in this paper) were only asked of subsamples.

⁷ This question was asked of only half the AuSSA sample

⁸ This involves reversing responses to items v106, v107, v110 and v112. Analysis showed that item v108 added nothing useful to the analysis and it was omitted from the scale. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the Family scale was 0.73 and for the Parenting scale was 0.68.