



Preference flows at the 2004 House of Representatives election

Introduction

Since the introduction of preferential voting in 1918, one question is often asked: which of the major parties has benefited most from the preferences of minor parties and independents?

The direction of minor party preferences has changed considerably since 1949. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Coalition (Liberal and [then] Country parties) was the clear beneficiary of minor party preferences.¹ However, with the demise of the Democratic Labor Party and the birth of new centre-orientated parties in the 1970s, the advantage enjoyed by the Coalition was reduced to such an extent that by the 1980s and early 1990s the Australian Labor Party (ALP) enjoyed the substantial advantage.²

This Research Note discusses the role of preferences in elections since the expansion of the Parliament in 1984 (the second election when full distribution of preferences was undertaken) and provides details on the direction of preferences at the 2004 election.

Significance of preferences

Since 1984, there has been an increase in the number of divisions where preferences have been required—1990, 1998 and 2001 had very large increases—but there has not been a corresponding increase in the number of divisions where the result has been changed by preferences (see Table 1).

At the 2004 election, preferences were required to be distributed in 61 divisions, but in only eight—Parramatta, Richmond, Bendigo, Melbourne Ports, Adelaide,

Hindmarsh, Cowan and Swan—did a party win after trailing on first preference votes; the ALP won all of these divisions.

Table 1: Coming from behind

Election	Divisions where preferences required		Three-cornered contests	Divisions won from behind
	Total	%		
1984	44	29.7	35	12
1987	54	36.5	41	4
1990	92	62.2	29	8
1993	63	42.9	30	12
1996	65	43.9	15	7
1998	98	66.2	16	7
2001	87	58.0	16	6
2004	61	40.7	4	8

Three-cornered contests (where the Liberal, National and Labor parties each stand a candidate in a division) have now become less common—a total of 9 in 2004 compared with 72 in 1987—and are now an insignificant determinant of the number of divisions where preferences are required to be distributed.

Of more significance is the low proportion of first preference votes received by the major parties in the last three elections (see Table 2).

Direction of preferences

Although preferences were not significant in determining the 2004 election outcome, there is still interest in knowing what the benefit from preference flows was to the major parties.

Table 2 shows the difference between the first preference votes and the two-party preferred votes for the major parties at the 2004

election and compares them with the previous seven elections.

From 1984 the ALP clearly has gained more from preferences than the Coalition, although in the 1996 and 1998 elections the Coalition was able to somewhat reduce this advantage. The last two elections have seen the ALP regain its advantage, but the years 1996–2004 show just how its share of first preferences has fallen. In 2004 it recorded its lowest vote since 1931 and 1934.³

While it is clear that the Labor Party has been the main beneficiary of overall minor party and independent preferences in recent elections, what has not been clear is the support the major parties have received from the individual minor parties and independents.

Table 3 shows, for each party contesting the 2004 election, the number of first preference votes the party received and the percentage of those votes that flowed to the Labor

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Table 2: House of Representatives elections, 1984–2004

Per cent				
Election	First preference votes (a)	Two-party preferred votes	Increase from preferences (b)	Preference split (c)
1984				
ALP	47.55	51.77	4.22	57
Coalition	45.01	48.23	3.22	43
1987				
ALP	45.83	50.83	5.00	62
Coalition	46.08	49.17	3.09	38
1990				
ALP	39.44	49.90	10.47	61
Coalition	43.46	50.10	6.64	39
1993				
ALP	44.92	51.44	6.51	60
Coalition	44.27	48.56	4.30	40
1996				
ALP	38.75	46.37	7.62	54
Coalition	47.25	53.63	6.38	46
1998				
ALP	40.10	50.98	10.89	53
Coalition	39.51	49.02	9.51	47
2001				
ALP	37.84	49.05	11.21	59
Coalition	43.01	50.95	7.94	41
2004				
ALP	37.64	47.26	9.62	61
Coalition	46.71	52.74	6.04	39

(a) For Coalition, aggregate of Liberal and National Parties.

(b) Two party-preferred votes minus first preference votes.

(c) Percentage share of total increase between first preference and two-party preferred votes.

Party and to the Coalition when the party's preferences were distributed. (Note that the final preference destination is not available for those divisions where there was not an ALP/Coalition final contest.)⁴ All independent candidates are included in the 'Others' category and the votes shown for the Liberal and National parties are those that were cast in 'three-cornered' contests.

One interesting point is that nearly 50 per cent of preferences allocated have been cast by Green voters. The Greens' first preference votes have increased from 294 000 in 1996 to the current level of 828 000, while the preference flow to the ALP has increased from 67 per cent to 81 per cent over the same period.

The 2004 election saw the advent of the Family First Party. It stood candidates in every division in Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania and, overall, in 109 of the 150 divisions in Australia. It was the second highest vote winning minor party

and two-thirds of its vote went to the Coalition.

Conclusion

These figures show the importance for the ALP of first preferences—the party has done very well in gaining preferences from other parties, but, since 1996, this has not helped it gain office.⁵

1. 'Between 1949 and 1977, of the eighty-five divisions in which the candidate with most first preferences lost the division, Labor picked up just four, with DLP preferences being particularly important in blocking many victories.' Scott Bennett, *Winning and losing, Australian national elections*, Melbourne University Press, 1996, p. 55.
2. Gerard Newman, 'The role of preferences in the 2001 election', [Research Note](#), no. 39, Parliamentary Library, 28 May 2002; and, Gerard Newman, 'Preference flows at the 1998 House of Representatives election', [Research Note](#), no. 4, Parliamentary Library, 31 August 1999.
3. Scott Bennett, Gerard Newman and Andrew Kopras, 'Commonwealth election 2004', [Research Brief](#), no. 13, Parliamentary Library, 14 March 2005, pp. 5, 17.
4. Since 1996, the Australian Electoral Commission has traced the preference flows from excluded candidates to the final two candidates (*not* parties, i.e. ALP/Coalition).
5. See Bennett, Newman and Kopras, *op. cit.*, pp. 11, 33, 39.

Table 3: Final destination of preferences, 2004 election

Party	Votes		
	No.	ALP %	LP/NP %
Liberal Party	10 938	18.07	81.93
The Nationals	29 736	15.30	84.70
The Greens	828 003	80.86	19.14
Family First Party	226 933	33.32	66.68
Australia Democrats	142 752	58.98	41.02
One Nation	134 338	43.83	56.17
Christian Democratic Party	72 241	25.37	74.63
Citizens Electoral Council	41 750	52.20	47.80
Socialist Alliance	13 647	74.16	25.84
New Country Party	9 439	40.84	59.16
liberals for forests	9 969	40.31	59.69
No GST	7 802	61.89	38.11
Ex-Service, Service & Veterans Party	4 877	50.95	49.05
Progressive Labour Party	3 775	80.64	19.36
Outdoor Recreation Party	3 505	55.63	44.37
Save the ADI Site Party	3 490	66.88	33.12
The Great Australians	2 824	38.53	61.47
The Fishing Party	2 516	54.85	45.15
Lower Excise Fuel and Beer Party	2 007	47.04	52.96
Democratic Labor Party	1 372	41.47	58.53
Non-Custodial Parents Party	1 132	73.14	26.86
Help End Marijuana Prohibition	787	58.07	41.93
Nuclear Disarmament Party	341	79.18	20.82
Aged and Disability Pensioners Party	285	54.04	45.96
Others	158 422	46.74	53.26
Total	1 712 881	61.14	38.86

Note: Excludes votes in Calare, Kennedy, Mayo and New England where there were no two-party (ALP/Coalition) final contests.