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Policy Forum: Economics and Populism

Australia Demonstrates the Rise of Populism is About More than Economics

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Abstract

Votes for established centre-right and centre-left political parties are falling across the developed world. Australia is not immune from this trend: in the 2016 federal election, more people voted for minor parties than at any point since the Second World War. Australia is an interesting case study for the rest of the world on the origins of populist support. Political scientists have struggled to separate the effects of cultural shifts and poor economic outcomes (low wages and rising inequality) in many countries because these shifts have occurred simultaneously. However, in Australia the economy was relatively healthy during the period of rising minor party support. Our analysis suggests that falling trust in government and a backlash against the pace of social change explain much of the collapse in support for the political mainstream.

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1. The Rising Minor Party Vote in Australia

The 2016 federal election crystallised a trend in Australian electoral results. In both the Senate and the House of Representatives the vote for minor parties reached the highest level since the Second World War (Figure 1).

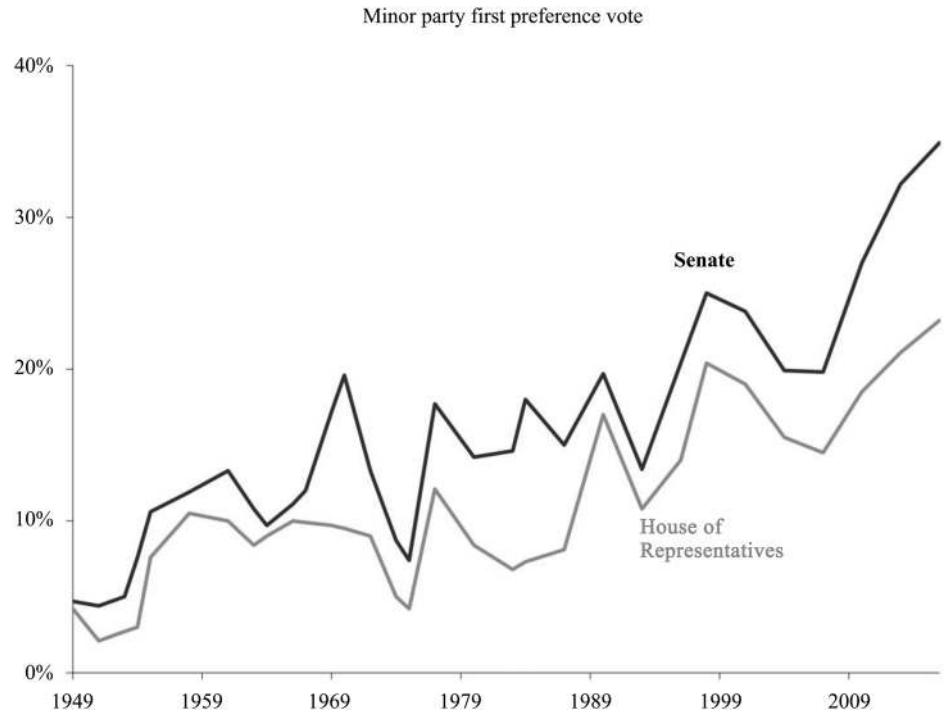
The minor party vote vacillates according to the politics and personalities of the day. Previous peaks in the minor party Senate vote coincided with peaks in support for high-profile minor parties: the Democratic Labour Party (11.6 per cent) in 1970, the Australian Democrats (12.6 per cent) in 1990 and One Nation (9.0 per cent) in 1998. The Greens are an important component of the minor party vote but their vote share has not meaningfully shifted since 2004.

But beyond the 'noise' of individual elections, there has been a clear increase in the tendency of Australians to vote for minor parties since 1949. The Senate vote for minor parties has exceeded 25 per cent in the past three elections, a level not reached in the previous 40 years.

And this time it is not all just about one 'bright star' party capturing the public imagination. Rather, the minor party vote is allocated across a disparate group of parties often with strong state-specific support, such as One Nation (Queensland), Derryn Hinch (Victoria), Nick Xenophon (South Australia) and Jacqui Lambie (Tasmania).

These trends mimic voting shifts internationally. Across the developed world, the vote for traditional centre-left and centre-right parties has fallen since about 2000 by 10 percentage points or more in most developed countries

Figure 1 The Minor Party Vote Has Been Growing Over Time[a]



Source: Australian Electoral Commission data provided by Antony Green.
Note: (a) For the purposes of this historical analysis we treat the Greens as a minor party.

(Barth 2016). The rise of populist movements across Europe and Latin America, Donald Trump's election as US President, and the Brexit vote have created global interest in what is causing disillusionment with the 'mainstream'.

2. Causes of Populist Sentiment: Theory and Evidence

Political science literature tends to focus on either economic or cultural insecurity as the cause of populist sentiment in Western democracies. The economic insecurity hypothesis posits that the 'losers' from globalisation protest about the erosion of their job security and the falls in their relative incomes by voting for someone outside the political mainstream (Esses Jackson and Armstrong 1998; Riek, Mania and Gaertner 2006). Cultural explanations are more diverse but tend to consider rising populist sentiment as either rooted in opposition to progressive social change[1] or a response to an erosion in status of a previously dominant group.[2]

Distinguishing these effects has proved challenging in countries where both economic upheaval and significant social change are backdrops to the rise in populist sentiment.

Using data from across Europe for the 13 years to 2014, Inglehart and Norris (2016) find that the experience of unemployment is linked with populist voting. However, they also find populist support is higher among small business owners and tradespeople than low-wage unskilled workers. And populist parties received significantly less support from people dependent on social welfare benefits. Inglehart and Norris conclude that cultural attitudes are a much stronger predictor of populist support.

Grechyna (2016) uses data from 66 countries to examine the economic, socio-historic and geographic contributions to political polarisation. She finds that the level

of trust and degree of income inequality are the most important determinants of political polarisation.

Funke, Schularick and Trebesch (2016) analyse voting patterns over 140 years and across 20 developed countries. They find that political polarisation increases strongly after financial crises. Far-right parties on average increase their vote share by 30 per cent after a financial crisis, as hostile attitudes to migration and trade resonate with the electorate. However, the authors find no significant effect on polarisation from normal recessions or economic downturns driven by other factors.

Some studies have called into question the narrative of Donald Trump's presidential victory on the back of the white, working class vote. Carnes and Lupu (2017) use data from the American National Election Studies to show that only 35 per cent of Trump voters have household incomes below US$50,000 per year—the national median. But others have highlighted that the biggest *increase* in vote for the Republican candidate came from those with low incomes. Of those with incomes less than US$30,000, 16 per cent more voted for Trump in 2016 than Mitt Romney in 2013 Liddy (2016).

Studies of the Brexit vote point to a similarly complicated relationship between economic circumstances and voting to leave the European Union. Becker, Fetzer and Novy (2017) find the Leave vote was higher in UK regions with lower education levels, higher manufacturing employment, low incomes and higher unemployment. But Kaufman (2016) finds that negative views on immigration and favourable views on the death penalty had greater explanatory power than income and class in predicting voting intention in the Brexit referendum.

3. A Framework for Considering the Minor Party Vote in Australia

This article explores the extent to which the rise in the vote for minor parties in Australia over the past 15 years (post 2004) might be a response to economic or cultural insecurity. We also investigate another possible explanation—falling trust in government—which has coincided with the popularity of minor parties.

In assessing which of these factors might count as a good explanation for the rise in minor party vote we use several criteria.

- Does the explanation correlate with the rise in the minor party vote over time?
- Does it align with the views of the voters for the minor parties?
- Is it an issue reflected in the policy platforms of the minor parties?

We consider a good explanation for the rise in the minor party vote would satisfy all of these criteria, that is, it would align with the increase in the minor party vote since 2007 (including the big jump in 2013), be a prominent issue in many minor party platforms, and would be a more significant issue for minor party voters than for others.

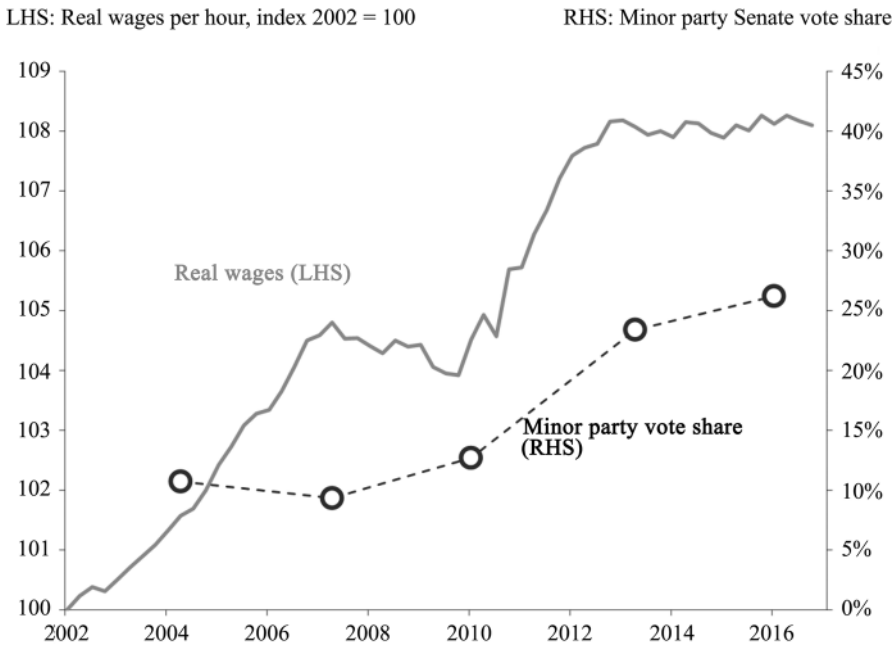
4. The Minor Party Vote and Economic Insecurity

Growing economic insecurity is a common explanation for the rise in the populist vote across Western nations. Low wage growth, job insecurity and rising inequality have all been fingered as culprits for growing political disaffection in Australia. But studies have failed to find any relationship between the vote-share of the incumbent and the health of the Australian economy. Indeed, Hellwig and McAllister (2016) document the 'paradox' of the low levels of economic voting in Australia compared to similar democracies.

4.1 The Rise in the Minor Party Vote Does Not Correlate Well with Most Indicators of Economic Insecurity

Many economic indicators—particularly wages growth and inequality—do not align well with the changes in minor party fortunes over the past two decades (Figure 2).

Figure 2 The Minor Party Vote Share Jumped At The End of a 3-Year Rise In Incomes



Source: ABS (2018a, 2018c), Australian Electoral Commission (2004–2016).
Note: Minor party vote is defined here and for the rest of this article to exclude the Greens. The Greens have maintained a strong national presence in the analysis period (they have received at least 7 per cent of the first preference Senate vote across Australia in each election since 2004) but do not seem to be tapping into the broader discontent we document. Indeed, their first-preference Senate vote was only slightly higher in the 2016 election than in 2004.

The economy and wages have grown less strongly over the past decade than the previous one (ABS 2017a, 2018c). However, the minor party vote increased most strongly in the period in which wages and income growth was most healthy (see Figure 2 for sources). Between the 2010 and 2013 elections the minor party vote increased by more than 10 percentage points. Wages grew strongly in this period because of the mining boom.[3]

Economic optimism also peaked in 2013. More Australians indicated they expected the financial situation of their household to improve over that year than at any point since 2001 (Cameron and McAllister 2016).

Nor does inequality correlate with minor party support. Income inequality increased a little and wealth inequality increased materially in the mid- to late-2000s. The Gini coefficient for household (equivalised) disposable income increased from 0.31 in 2004 to a peak of 0.34 just before the global financial crisis (GFC). This period of rising inequality corresponded with a *fall* in the minor party vote between the 2004 and 2007 elections.

In contrast, there has been no consistent change in income inequality since the GFC. The Gini coefficient has oscillated but largely stayed in the band between 0.32 and just above 0.33. Indeed, the share of income earned by those at different parts of the income distribution has been almost entirely stable since 2009–2010 (ABS 2017b).

Wealth inequality increased more than income inequality, but again it mainly lifted before the GFC when the minor party vote was falling. It has remained relatively stable at this higher level after the crisis (Daley, Coates and Wiltshire 2018).

Unemployment is the only economic variable that is reasonably well correlated with the minor party vote over the past two decades. Unemployment rose between the 2007 and

2010 elections and then again between the 2010 and 2013 elections. But the rise in the minor party vote in the 2016 election was against the backdrop of falling unemployment (ABS 2018b, Australian Electoral Commission 2004, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2016).

High rates of unemployment and job insecurity might lead to a shift in votes to minor parties if workers blame the policies of the major parties—such as support for free trade or immigration—for the loss of local jobs. There is some international and local evidence of a link between populist voting and job insecurity from trade competition.[4]

Concerns about employment prospects may also make some groups more receptive to the anti-immigration messages of One Nation or some of the smaller minor parties.[5]

4.2 *Minor Party Voters are More Concerned about the Economy and are More Anti-Trade*

Minor party voters tend to be more pessimistic about the economy than major party voters. They are more likely to describe the state of the economy as poor and to be concerned about the direction in which it is heading (Essential Research 2016e).

Australian Election Study data suggest that pessimism is particularly stark among One Nation supporters. Fewer than 10 per cent of people who voted for One Nation in the Senate in 2016 expected their financial situation would be better in 12 months' time (Australian Election Study 2016).

These patterns are consistent with international findings that voters for populist parties tend to be more pessimistic than other voters, even when their incomes are growing on par.[6] This has been attributed to the success of populist parties in cultivating a narrative that voters are losing out economically, even among those who have done relatively well.

The pessimism of One Nation voters is also reflected in negative assessments of the government's competence to manage the economy. More than 40 per cent expected the government to have a bad effect on the economy in the next 12 months. This was much higher than for voters of any other party, including the ALP (which was in opposition) (Australian Election Study 2016).

Minor party voters are no more in favour of economic redistribution than ALP or Greens voters. But minor party voters are much more likely to think Australia has lost from globalisation compared to voters from the other parties. And they are more likely to agree that free trade has gone 'too far' (Essential Research 2016b, 2016g).

4.3 *Trade Policies Feature Heavily in Minor Party Economic Platforms*

Most minor parties place less emphasis on economic issues in their platforms than the major parties. The exception is trade policy, which is more heavily emphasised by some minor parties. One Nation is strongly opposed to 'free trade economic policies', arguing they have been responsible for the decline in manufacturing (One Nation 2015b). The Nick Xenophon Team (NXT, recently renamed *Centre Alliance*) calls for stronger anti-dumping laws (Nick Xenophon Team 2017a), and Bob Katter advocated against the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (Katter's Australian Party 2017). These policies differentiate these minor parties from the 'consensus' among the major parties about the economic benefits of free trade.

5. The Minor Party Vote and Cultural Insecurity

In Australia, as in other developed nations, the culture is evolving. Australians are becoming more progressive and culturally diverse (Cameron and McAllister 2016; Perales and Campbell 2017). One explanation for the rise in the minor party vote is that some voters want to 'take back control' in a world where the direction and pace of change are not to their liking.[7]

5.1 *Minor Party Voters Feel 'Left Behind' by Society*

Minor party voters are more likely to believe life in Australia is worse compared to 50 years ago (Essential Research 2016c). They wish that

Australia could be more like it was in the past (Essential Research 2016f), and they have little faith that the next generation will live better lives than their parents (Essential Research 2016d). It is unclear how much these views reflect an assessment of economic outcomes, cultural change or a combination of the two.

Other surveys indicate that cultural change is of particular concern to minor party voters. Minor party voters want to protect the norms and historical narratives of 'traditional Australia'. Minor party voters are more likely to oppose changing the date of Australia Day or modifying inscriptions on public statues to reflect a more 'complete history' (Essential Research 2017c, 2018). One Nation voters particularly embrace these values: 79 per cent take pride in an Australian way of life 'to a great extent', and 92 per cent strongly agree that maintaining an Australian way of life and culture is important, Markus (2017).

This split is not down the traditional 'left–right axis'. Australian minor party voters are especially likely to say they do not identify as 'left' or 'right' wing (Essential Research 2017d). Political theorists overseas have suggested that a second political axis is forming between 'nationalists' and 'globalists' (Haidt 2016a).[8] Haidt (2016a) calls this divide 'the central axis of [political] conflict within and across many nations'. According to Haidt 2016a, 2016b) nationalists become mobilised if they perceive external physical threats or destabilising social change, especially when there is a threat to a group's established political status.[9] There is a growing body of work looking at the influence of this sort of voter psychology in the Trump vote in the United States, and the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom.[10]

5.2 *Minor Parties Tap into These Concerns with Rhetoric and Policy*

Many of the minor parties tap into these concerns through rhetoric and policies that emphasise 'Australia first'. One of the Nick Xenophon Team's three policy priorities is 'Australian made and Australian jobs' (Nick Xenophon Team 2017b). One Nation lists 'Australian sovereignty' as its second-highest principle, after the equal treatment of all Australians (One Nation 2015d). It is also evident in some of the state-based advocacy of the minor parties, such as the Jacqui Lambie Network's assurance that it is 'putting Tasmania first' (Jacqui Lambie Network 2018), or the Australian Conservatives' Trump-like promise to 'make South Australia great again' (Dornan 2018).

5.3 *Immigration is a Lightning Rod for Broader Cultural Anxiety*

Concerns about immigration can also be a manifestation of cultural anxiety. These attitudes are more evident among minor party voters: a 2016 Essential Poll found that 38 per cent of minor party voters believe that multiculturalism has had a negative impact on Australia, compared to 22 per cent of Liberal National Party (LNP) voters (the next highest group) (Essential Research 2016a).

One Nation has the most draconian policies on immigration—it calls for zero net immigration, the abolition of the *Racial Discrimination Act*, and an end to multiculturalism (One Nation 2015a, 2015c). And it attracts votes disproportionately from those with negative attitudes to migration (Australian Election Study 2016). Almost 90 per cent of people who voted One Nation in the 2016 election thought that immigrant numbers should be reduced—compared with between 10 and 55 per cent of voters for other parties. One Nation voters were also significantly more likely to believe that immigrants increase crime (80 per cent) and take jobs (62 per cent) compared to voters for other parties (Australian Election Study 2016). Mughan and Paxton (2006) argue that One Nation voters are motivated to support the party because they are concerned that migrants will not assimilate, and that multiculturalism will harm Australia's culture.

6. The Minor Party Vote and Trust in Government

The political science literature has less to say on the role of changing attitudes to government in evoking populist sentiment. However, there are good reasons to suggest falling trust in

government has played a role in the rise in support for minor parties in Australia.

6.1 Trust in Political Institutions is Declining in Australia and Around the Developed World

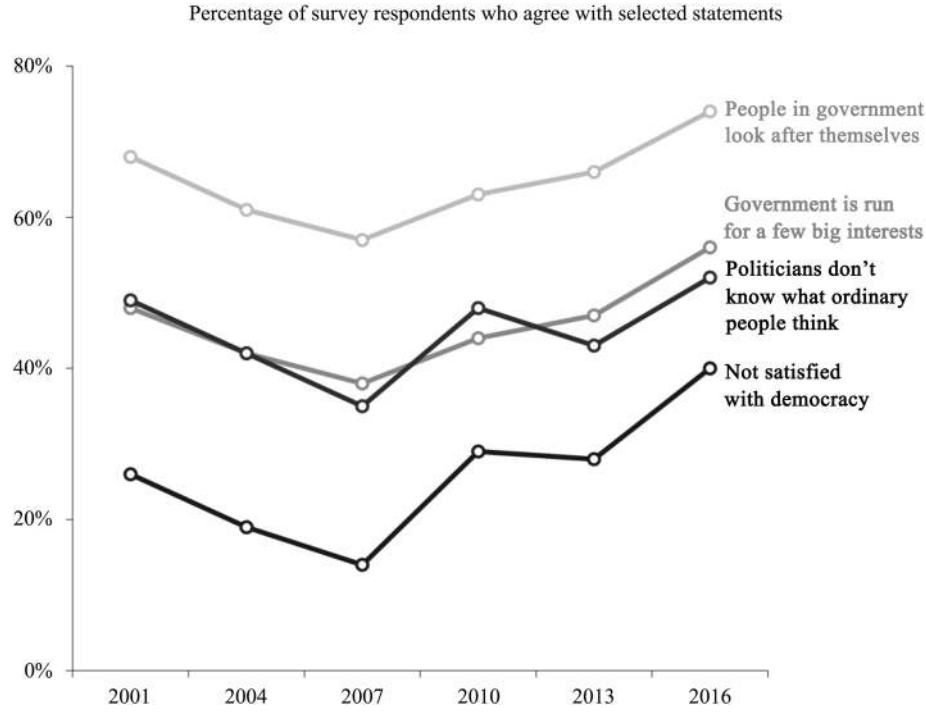
Trust in institutions is low around the world. The 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer found that more than two-thirds of the 28 countries surveyed are 'distrusters'—in these countries, less than half the population trust the key institutions of business, government, media and non-government organisations (Edelman 2018).

Trust has been in serious decline for a decade. Edelman argues that 'a trust implosion' followed the GFC in 2008 (Edelman 2017). Australia did not escape the fall-out: since the 2007 election, there has been a 10-percentage point increase in the share of voters who believe people in government look after themselves and do not know what ordinary people think, and that government is run by a few big interests (Figure 3). Forty per cent of voters are dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Australia, an increase of 25 percentage points since 2007 (Cameron and McAllister 2016; Markus 2017).

Distrust in government manifests as distrust of the two major political parties. About two-thirds of Australians believe major party politicians will promise anything to win votes, and only a third believe they will follow through on their word (Essential Research 2017a, Essential Research 2017b).

The distrust in major political parties is reflected in lower voter loyalty. The proportion of voters who have always supported the same party fell from 52 per cent in 2010 to 40 per cent in 2016—the lowest level since the survey commenced in 1967. Voters are also less likely to follow party 'How to Vote' cards for the lower house. And more voters are hedging their bets at the ballot box by voting for one party in the House of Representatives, and another in the Senate (Cameron and McAllister 2016).

Figure 3 Australians Have Become Less Trustful of Government



Source: Cameron and McAllister (2016).

The minor party vote rose over the past decade as people became less satisfied with the political system. In contrast, the minor party vote fell between the 2004 and 2007 elections, coinciding with an improvement in the standing of government. Trust rose, and other measures of political cynicism temporarily declined. It is possible Kevin Rudd's popularity in the 'Kevin 07' election generated broader goodwill towards the Australian political system.

6.2 Minor Party Voters are Particularly Disillusioned

Compared to Labor and Coalition voters, minor party voters are more likely to believe that Australia's economic and political institutions require 'fundamental change' (Essential Research 2018; Markus 2017). They are less likely to believe that the government understands or cares about the needs of ordinary people, they trust politicians less, and they are less satisfied with democracy (Australian Election Study 2016).

Distrust of government is the area of opinion that most clearly separates minor party voters from major party voters. Voters for One Nation, the Nick Xenophon Team and other minor parties all have lower levels of trust than voters for Labor, Liberal, Nationals or the Greens (Australian Election Study 2016).

Minor parties' rhetoric often emphasises the need to 'drain the swamp' and many have policies to reform political institutions, such as establishing a federal anti-corruption body,[11] reforming political donations,[12] increasing transparency around political entitlements[13] and introducing Citizen-Initiated Referendums.[14]

7. Conclusion

Australia's shifting political sands defy easy explanation. Falling trust in government is clearly important to the rising minor party vote. As almost every indicator of trust in government has headed south, the minor party vote has risen. And minor party voters have much lower trust in government than those who vote for the majors.

The increasing minor party vote also seems to reflect rising cultural insecurity. Some minor party voters are nostalgic for a time when people like them seemed to have had more control over their lives and the country's direction. A vote for a minor party, particularly One Nation, can be a vote to protect the cultural symbols and narratives that are associated with 'traditional Australia', as well as to prevent further change through immigration.

Economics alone seems to be less important. Most economic indicators do not align closely with the minor party vote. But rising unemployment and the associated dissatisfaction with the major party 'consensus' on free trade may have played a role. Minor parties have been adept at incorporating these specific concerns into their broader narrative about destructive social change and the fickleness of the mainstream parties.

These findings have relevance for the understanding of rising populist sentiment. The Australian experience shows that poor economic outcomes are not a necessary condition for a backlash against the political mainstream. Indeed, declining trust in government and a backlash against social change may be sufficient to mobilise support for populist challengers.

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Endnotes

1. See the following for explanations of the theory of opposition to progressive social change, Beauchamp (2017), Inglehart and Norris (2016), Kaletsky (2016), Sayer (2017).

2. See the following for explanations of the theory of loss of community power, Albrechtsen (2016), Inglehart and Norris (2016), Shepherd (2017).

3. Although the economy and wages grew fastest in the mining states, the rising tide lifted all economic boats across the country: even in Victoria median equivalised household incomes grew 1.9 per cent a year in real terms between 2010 and 2013.

4. These papers include Becker, Fetzer and Novy (2017), Carnes and Lupu (2017), Funke, Schularick and Trebesch (2016), Inglehart and Norris (2016), London School of Economics and Political Science (2016).

5. Mughan, Bean and McAllister (2003). Malgouyres (2017) and Dippel, Gold and Heblich (2015) find similar results in Europe suggesting that regions exposed to trade with low-wage countries have more voters shifting to the extreme right.

6. Refer to international studies given in endnote 2.

7. See endnote 2 for works discussing this theory.

8. Other framings of this divide include: the divide between 'somewheres' and 'anywheres' (see Goodhart 2017); the divide between authoritarians and cosmopolitans (see Stenner 2009); and the divide between liberals and conservatives (see Hibbing, Smith and Alford 2014, Roberts 2015).

9. See also Stenner (2009).

10. See Hibbing et al. (2014), Roberts (2015) and Stenner (2009), for earlier work on this topic.

11. An anti-corruption body was supported by the Jacqui Lambie Network (2017), the Nick Xenophon Team (2017b), and the Liberal Democrats.

12. The Jacqui Lambie Network (2017) promised to reform donation laws as part of its 'Clean Up Canberra' campaign.

13. Supported by the Nick Xenophon Team (2017b).

14. Supported by One Nation and Liberal Democrats.

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