HOW DO AUSTRALIAN CLASSICAL LIBERALS VOTE?

Though rare, classical liberal voters can affect major party support, explain **Sinclair Davidson**, **Tim Fry**, and **Breanna Pellegrini**

In a recent issue of *Policy*, writing in the context of minor party politics, John Humphreys describes the benefits of an Australian classical liberal political party.[1] In the same issue, Andrew Norton writes, 'classical liberals are rare.'[2] He is able to show that classical liberals may comprise about 3–7% of the voting population. This is a remarkably low figure—a 2006 Cato Institute study showed that up to 13% of the US voting-age population are classical liberals (or libertarians).[3] There are more classical liberals in the US than there are people in Australia.

Neither Humphreys nor Norton define what a classical liberal is, though Norton does tell us how to identify them. Here, we fill the definition gap and also provide some information about the electoral prospects of classical liberalism in Australia.

What is a classical liberal?

Many readers would be familiar with the traditional 'left'/'right' dichotomy. Those individuals who favour more government intervention might be classified as being on the 'left,' while those who favour less government intervention might be classified as being 'right.' Given the dynamics of winner-take-all politics, and the median voter theorem,[4] we might expect to see two competing political parties occupying the centre, with one being a centre-left party and the other being a centre-right party. As a rough-and-ready approximation, this situation describes the politics within the Australian House of Representatives.

Of course, this is a slight simplification of a more nuanced political environment. Governments intervene along a range of human behaviour. A simple left/right dichotomy is not going to describe the full range of political beliefs. For example, some individuals may favour more government intervention in the economy, but less intervention in social matters, while others may prefer less government intervention in the economy *and* less government intervention in social matters. A traditional left–right spectrum will not capture all of these nuances. That is not to suggest, however, that the left–right spectrum provides no information about voter behaviour. Individuals do self-identify with being left or right, and do vote for political parties that they perceive to have matching left or right characteristics.[5]

Classical liberals can be described as those individuals who want less government intervention in the economy and less government intervention in social issues. By correlating preferences for government intervention in the economy and in social matters, four different political types can be identified. The resulting four-way ideological matrix (figure 1) can describe various political positions.[6]

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Figure 1: A four-way ideological matrix

		Government intervention in the economy	
		More	**Less**
Government intervention in social matters	**More**	Populist	Conservative (right)
	Less	Progressive (left)	Classical liberal

The traditional left and right positions can be described as being 'progressive' and 'conservative.' This matrix also highlights the interesting case of 'populists.' These voters (and politicians) want to expand government across the board. The now-defunct One Nation party fell into this category. Indeed, according to the 2001 Australian Election Survey, many voters (28.16%) identified One Nation as being an extreme right party, while others (15.12%) identified it as being an extreme left party. Classical liberals are those voters who would prefer smaller government: less economic intervention and less social intervention. Having defined what a classical liberal is, the difficulty is in identifying individuals who might adhere to those views.

David Boaz and David Kirby make use of a series of questions to identify US classical liberals. Norton does the same, and so do we. Many classical liberals may not self-identify as being such, and in Australia no survey has ever asked individuals to do so. We make use of various issues tracked by the Australian Election Study (AES) to calculate the number of Australian classical liberals.[7] Unfortunately the AES questionnaires are not consistent from year to year. We use the same questions in each questionnaire to identify classical liberals, and are constrained to use particular questions due to data availability.

We have two definitions of classical liberal. The broader of them (Definition 1, or D1) makes classical liberal voters those who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'decriminalise smoking of marijuana,' and who answered strongly in favour of reducing taxes in relation to the statement, 'choice between taxes and social services.' The narrower of them (Definition 2, or D2) takes in those voters who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, 'income and wealth should be redistributed,' and those voters who responded 'not gone far enough' or 'not gone nearly far enough' to the statement related to 'the number of migrants allowed into Australia.'

Based on these definitions, we then estimate the number of classical liberals over the period 1990–2004. The results are shown in table 1.

In 1993 and 1996, the D1 estimate is similar to the US estimate. According to this estimate, the high-water mark for classical liberalism is 1996, and the numbers decline dramatically to almost halve by 2004. This suggests that classical liberalism has a bleak future in Australia, and is consistent with the perception that Australia would have a lower proportion of classical liberals than does the US.[8] The estimates for D2 are of a similar order of magnitude as Norton's estimate of 3–7%, albeit on the low side of that estimate. An interesting feature of our two definitions is that there is only a small overlap between them. We expected that most of the D2 individuals would fall into the D1 group—but we didn't find that. The views of the two differently defined groups are similar in many respects, but the major difference relates to migration: a majority of D1 classical liberals think that the number of migrants allowed into Australia has gone too far. As some classical liberals argue that in a welfare state migration can impose taxation costs on current residents, the issue of migration may have limits as a proxy for classical liberal beliefs.

Table 1: Estimated proportion of classical liberals in Australia

Election year	Definition 1 (D1) (%)	Definition 2 (D2) (%)
1990	4.03	2.92
1993	11.12	1.19
1996	12.41	1.67
1998	9.93	2.25
2001	7.48	2.76
2004	6.39	3.31

Source: Data from AES, and authors' calculations

How do classical liberals vote?

Boaz and Kirby are able to show that classical liberals account for 13% of US voters, and that not only do they vote, but their vote is in flux. In other words, incumbent US politicians should take classical liberal concerns seriously. Looking at US presidential elections, classical liberals supported George H. Bush in 1998 (74%) but not 1992 (35%) and George W. Bush in 2000 (72%) and again in 2004 (59%). Boaz and Kirby argue that if George W. Bush had picked up just 50% of the classical liberal vote, rather than the 59% that he did, he would have lost the election. Senator Kerry offered very little to classical liberals, but there was a classical liberal backlash against President Bush's policies. The Boaz and Kirby paper was published one month prior to the 2006 US midterm elections. They made a very prescient observation:

> Congressional voting showed a similar swing from 2002 to 2004. Libertarians apparently became disillusioned with Republican overspending, social intolerance, civil liberties infringements, and the floundering war in Iraq. If that trend continues into 2006 and 2008, Republicans will lose elections they would otherwise win.[9]

In other words, in the US, classical liberals have voted for the Republican Party but are also happy to vote against the Republicans (to vote for the Democrats, for instance) if angered or disillusioned.

Australian classical liberal voting behaviour has never before been estimated. An Australian political party espousing classical liberal views (the Liberal Democratic Party, now named the Liberty and Democracy Party) has stood candidates at some elections, and garnered 1–2% of the vote. It received just 0.15% of the Senate vote in the 2007 federal election. This is not necessarily surprising; the US Libertarian Party has much less electoral support than there are US classical liberals. Using our two definitions of classical liberal, we determine the first preference vote of those individuals over the past six federal elections. The results are shown in table 2.

The broader definition (D1) suggests that the bulk of classical liberal voters support the elected government of the day. In 1990 and 1993, a larger proportion voted for the ALP, and between 1996 and 2004 a larger proportion voted for the Liberal Party. The Liberal share of votes from D1 classical liberals was especially high in 1998 and 2004. It appears that they supported the introduction of the GST and were unconcerned about the Iraq War and the (alleged) loss of civil liberties associated with the 'war on terror.' This result is very different from the US experience. Classical liberals in the narrow definition (D2) show a very high level of support for the Liberal Party. Again, it appears that classical liberals supported the introduction of the GST. To the extent that Australian classical liberals are concerned about the Iraq war and the alleged loss of civil liberties, this has not had any impact on the data. The classical liberal vote for the government rose from 50% in 2001 to 50.91% in 2004. In contrast, the US classical liberal vote for George W. Bush fell by 13% between 2000 and 2004. Classical liberals under D2 are very loyal Liberal Party voters—but, as Norton argues, they are also very rare.

Classical liberals, according to D1, are just as likely to be male (49.9%) as female (50.1%), whereas according to D2 they are more likely to be male (56.88%). On average, 47% of D1 voters described themselves as being 'working class,' while 44.76% described themselves as being 'middle

Table 2: How Australian classical liberals vote

Election year	Definition 1 (D1) (%)		Definition 2 (D2) (%)	
	Liberal	Labor	Liberal	Labor
1990	36.25	47.50	51.72	22.41
1993	41.72	46.93	51.43	37.14
1996	44.19	32.56	44.83	31.03
1998	43.65	29.28	60.98	26.83
2001	41.84	39.72	50.00	25.00
2004	51.89	35.85	50.91	30.91

Source: Data from AES, and authors' calculations.

Voting shares do not add up to 100% due to some voters supporting other political parties.

class.' Those that described themselves as middle class were more likely to be Liberal voters. In contrast, 66.29% of D2 voters described themselves as being middle class. D1 voters, on average, were in their early 40s, while D2 voters, on average, were in their late 40s.

D1 voters tended to have no post-secondary qualification (40.14%), or had a trade qualification (23.51%). They had above-average income, but earned less than D2 classical liberals, who did tend to have post-school qualifications. Over 70% of both groups of voters were not members of a trade union. There appears to be a religious split between the two definitions. Equal numbers of D1 voters were as likely to identify as Catholic (29.51%) as Anglican (29.89%), while 28.84% of D2 voters identified as Catholic and only 19.85% as Anglican.

Liberal-voting classical liberals under both definitions place themselves to the left of the Liberal Party on a left–right continuum. This suggests they vote for the economic policies of the Liberal Party. The positioning of Labor-voting classical liberals (again, under both definitions) is more complex; they place themselves to the left of the ALP, but to the right of the Liberal Party. We interpret this as indicating that they vote for the ALP because of its social policies. Both sets of voters agree that taxation is the most important issue at election time. D1 voters are concerned about unemployment, while D2 voters are very interested in education. Turning to somewhat controversial social issues, both groups overwhelmingly support the notion that a woman should be able to readily obtain an abortion (66.51% for D1 and 59.33% for D2). On the other hand, both groups agree or strongly agree that the death penalty should be reintroduced for murder (72.59% for D1 and 50.18% for D2).

Conclusion

Classical liberals make up a far smaller proportion of the voting population in Australia than in the US. Unlike in the US, the Australian classical liberal vote under the narrow definition (D2) is not in flux. These voters support the Liberal Party; they are older, wealthier, and more educated than classical liberals under the broader definition (D1). That latter group may well switch allegiance. They tended to vote for the ALP in the early 1990s, but for the Liberal Party from 1996. This represents an opportunity for both major political parties, and perhaps for the Liberty and Democracy Party. Each of the major parties may be able to pick up more classical liberal voters by addressing their concerns. For the Liberal Party, this means adopting more progressive social policies, while for the Labor Party this means espousing more 'conservative' economic policies. The challenge for these two parties, of course, is to court classical liberals without alienating their existing voters.

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Endnotes

1 John Humphreys, 'Taking Classical Liberalism to the People,' *Policy*, 23:1 (Autumn 2007), 40–43.
2 Andrew Norton, 'The Classical Liberal Constituency,' *Policy* 23:1 (Autumn 2007), 44.
3 David Boaz and David Kirby, 'The Libertarian Vote,' *Policy Analysis* 580 (18 October 2006), http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=6715.
4 The median voter theorem says that if voters will select the candidate whose policy preference matches their own, candidates must move towards the position of the median voter to maximise their chances of victory.
5 See Sinclair Davidson, Lisa Farrell, and Tim Fry, 'Lines in the Sand on the Australian Political Beach,' working paper, (Melbourne: RMIT University, 28 May 2004), http://repec.org/esAUSM04/up.16336.1077759095.pdf. Bryan Caplan reviews similar US evidence in his book, *The Myth of the Rational Voter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).
6 Based on William Maddox and Stuart Lilie, *Beyond Liberal and Conservative* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1984), 5.
7 The AES data (2004–2005) is available from the Australian Social Science Data Archive, http://assda.anu.edu.au/. Those who carried out the original collection and analysis of the data bear no responsibility for our analysis and interpretation of it.
8 See Greg Melleuish, 'The History of Liberty in Australia,' *Policy*, 23:1 (Autumn 2007), 33–36.
9 Boaz and Kirby, as above, 1.