

Voting patterns of church attenders

Elections in Australia

Reporting on voter intentions for federal elections is a staple of Australian media news cycles and a constant source of interest to governments, businesses and civil society alike. Australian federal elections are held to elect parliaments for three-year terms for the House of Representatives and in a 10-year period Australian voters could be required to vote on four separate occasions.

Is there a clear voting pattern for Australian church attenders in federal elections? In late 2016, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant church attenders was asked:

What have been your voting patterns over the last 10 years in lower house Federal elections?

- Generally Labor
- Generally Liberal/National Party
- Generally Greens
- Generally Family First, Australian Christians or Christian Democratic Party
- Generally One Nation
- Generally some other party or independents
- I have frequently voted differently
- I didn't vote

Overall findings

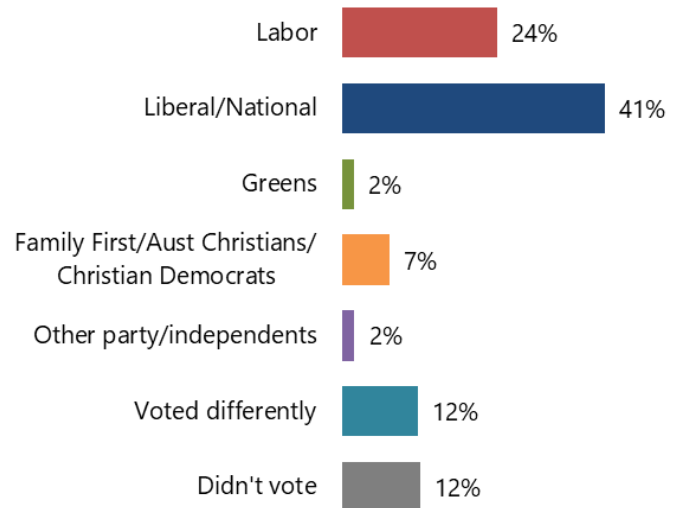
The 2016 survey shows that no party held a majority of attender support in the last 10 years, although attender voting patterns heavily favoured the Liberal/National Coalition. The overall voting patterns (see Figure 1) were as follows: Labor 24%, Liberal/National 41%, Greens 2%, Family First or Australian Christians or Christian Democratic Party 7%, and Other party or independents 2%¹. Another 12% frequently voted differently and 12% did not vote at all.

Denominational differences in voting

The 2016 survey also confirms that denominational differences in attender voting patterns do exist. Table 1 displays these differences.

¹ "Generally One Nation" and "Some other party or independents" were listed separately in the survey question. However, due to small numbers, the results are presented together here.

Figure 1: Church attender voting pattern, 2016



Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Surveys B, C and P (n=3,686).
Note: Missing = 13.4%.

Catholic attenders are the largest group to have voted Labor (34%). However, even Catholics were more likely to have voted Liberal/National with 38% indicating that they generally voted for the Coalition. Mainstream Protestants (Anglican, Uniting Church, Presbyterian, Lutheran) were the most likely to generally vote Liberal/National (50%), and Pentecostals were the most likely to generally vote Family First/Australian Christians/CDP (18%). Other Protestants were the least likely to generally vote Labor (13%), and Catholics were the least likely to generally vote Family First/Australian Christians/CDP (3%).

Table 1: Attender voting by denomination, 2016

	Catholic	Mainstream Protestant	Pentecostal	Other Protestant
	Percentage			
Labor	34	18	15	13
Liberal/National	38	50	34	43
Greens	1	3	1	3
Family First/ Australian Christians/CDP	3	7	18	14
Other party/independents	2	2	3	1
Frequently voted differently	12	12	14	9
Did not vote	11	9	15	17

Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Surveys B, C and P (n=3,686).

Demographic differences in voting

There is a strong correlation between age and the likelihood that attenders generally voted Liberal/National (see Table 2). Some 24% of attenders in their 20s voted for the Coalition, increasing to 57% of those aged 70+ (of course most attenders under 20 had not voted). In comparison, the Labor vote was much more consistent across age groups. The tendency to vote for minor parties and to change voting preferences decreased with age – a trend that is more apparent if the proportion of attenders who did not vote is taken into consideration.

Table 2: Church attender voting by age, 2016

	Age (years)							
	15 to 19	20 to 29	30 to 39	40 to 49	50 to 59	60 to 69	70 to 79	80 +
	Percentage							
Labor	5	24	21	21	26	29	25	31
Liberal/National	6	24	28	34	42	47	56	57
Greens	2	4	2	2	2	1	2	1
Family First/ Australian Christians/CDP	6	12	9	11	9	6	4	3
Other party/ independents	2	1	2	1	4	1	3	0
Frequently voted differently	5	15	16	13	14	12	9	7
Did not vote	75	20	23	17	4	4	1	1

Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Surveys B, C and P (n=3,634).

Gender played a minimal role in shaping attender voting patterns. Educational attainment appears to have some bearing, however; 38% of attenders with a degree generally voted Liberal/National, compared to 44% of attenders with a trade qualification and 43% of those whose highest level of formal education was school. Trade-qualified attenders were the least likely to indicate that they didn't vote (7%), compared with 15% of school-educated attenders and 13% of university graduates.

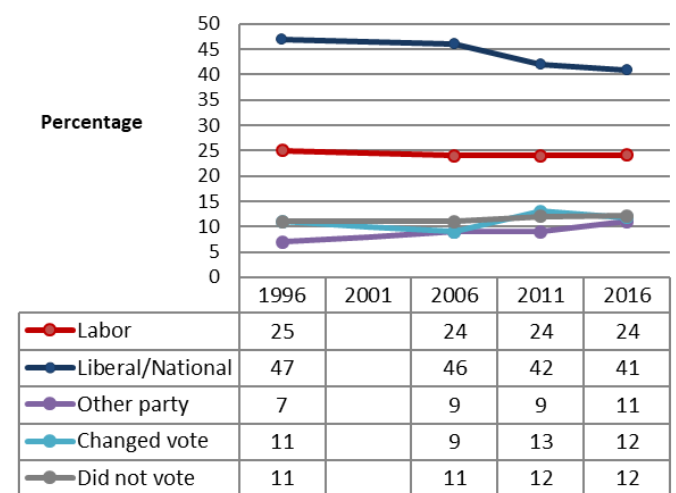
Previous surveys

Comparisons with 1996, 2006 and 2011 survey data indicate a decrease in voting for the Coalition, stability in the Labor vote, and an increase in voting for smaller parties/independents (see Figure 2).

Summary

While the patterns differ somewhat by denomination and demographic factors, especially age, Australian church attenders are predominantly conservative in their voting preferences. There has been a shift away from the Coalition towards minor parties/independents over 20 years.

Figure 2: Church attender voting 1996-2016



Source: 1996 NCLS Attender Sample Survey I; 2006 NCLS Attender Sample Survey J; 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Surveys N, O and R; 2016 Attender Sample Surveys B, C and P.

References

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Citation

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