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Plus ça change. . .? Institutional, Political and Social Influences on Local Spatial Variations in Australian Federal Voting

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It is often argued that features such as partisan de-alignment and targeted campaigning have led to certain kinds of local influences on voting (such as candidate and incumbency effects) becoming more important in recent decades, whereas theories of individualism and class de-alignment imply that the importance for voting of local contextual effects, such as ones based on social class context, should have reduced. In this article, I use an extensive set of multilevel analyses to explore the extent to which these outcomes are evident in Australia over the past four decades. As well as presenting and discussing several detailed findings of interest, relating to all of political and social factors and contextual effects, I also argue that the institutional structure has inhibited the extent of anything but short-term changes at the local level.

Introduction

Spatial variations in voting are staple fare for both popular and academic debates in Australia (and elsewhere), for the straightforward reason that such variations can be related to other features (such as demographic, economic, political or social ones) that also have a spatial referent and, hence, help in understanding factors underlying voting decisions, whether at particular elections or on a longer-term basis. A few common examples are associating inter-State voting differences at a federal level with the performance of State governments or the popularity of State political leaders; urban–rural differences; and intra-urban differences associated with patterns of social residential differentiation arising from socioeconomic, family or ethnic status.

One of the most interesting associated questions is whether observed spatial variations in voting arise solely (or almost so) from compositional effects; that is, from differential spatial concentrations of individuals with particular characteristics (e.g. similar occupations, education or income levels), with these individual factors being the important influences on voting, or whether there are also contextual

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influences at work. These might potentially operate at a wide variety of scales, ranging from small-scale local neighbourhoods through to large-scale regions, such as States. The primary idea here is that political attitudes and behaviour are necessarily influenced by the environments within which they occur, and it follows that if significant facets of the environments change, there may well be alterations in the extent and nature of spatial variations in voting.

Theories of individualisation, such as those of Inglehart (1990), imply that the extent of contextual effects should have diminished in recent decades. Furthermore, during the early part of the post-WWII period, it was a quite common argument in a number of countries that trends towards national integration (promoted by developments in mass communications) had reduced local and regional place-specific voting influences. In the USA, this was argued by Stokes (1967), and the observation of uniform national swing in Britain (e.g. Butler and Stokes 1971, 172) often attracted a similar explanation. In Australia, perhaps the most prominent advocate of this view was David Kemp, one of whose main conclusions when writing in the mid-1970s was that '. . .there had indeed been an increasing nationalisation of mass political responses in Australia from 1940 to 1972, with a declining proportion of variance attributable to state and local factors.' (Kemp 1978, 257)

Somewhat ironically, at about the time that Stokes was writing, the nationalisation process he had described in the USA began to reverse, with electoral incumbency advantages becoming large and significant (Erikson 1971). This has since been the subject of a large amount of research, with access to resources and advantages flowing from constituency service (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987) providing one main line of explanation, and partisan de-alignment being the other main one (see, for example, Cox and Katz 1996). In Britain, too, voting swings became less uniform in the 1970s, Cain et al. (1987, 194) found discernible effects of personal votes: '. . .an effect which may be growing in importance', and the issue of regionalism became a prominent topic of debate (e.g. Johnston, Pattie and Allsopp 1988). More recently, British scholars have studied the impact of constituency campaigning in detail (including targeting of particular seats), finding that it has had significant effects (e.g. Denver et al. 2003; Whiteley and Seyd 2003). A factor that might be working in the opposite direction, to decrease the extent of local effects, would be reductions in the extent of possible small-scale neighbourhood effects as a result of increasing individualism and class de-alignment. However, MacAllister et al. (2001) and Andersen and Heath (2002) both produced evidence consistent with the existence of ongoing class contextual effects in Britain. The latter authors also showed an increased constituency level variance from about the mid-1970s, which they explain primarily in political terms.

Both the British and USA experience, then, suggests increasing levels of localised effects in the past few decades,[1] although the extent is larger in the USA. Institutional aspects, social and economic changes and their interactions have all played a role. In Australia there has been relatively little research on these matters, although there are some obvious parallels in terms of the demographic, economic and social changes that have occurred. There is evidence of both class and partisan de-alignment here (e.g. Bean 1994; Goot 1994; McAllister 1997), although changes in the extent of partisan de-alignment are less than in the USA and Britain, and the extent of decline in

[1]Canada's experience has also been one of increasing de-nationalisation, although there it has operated more at the provincial level.

the association between social structure more broadly and voting was quite small for an extended period from the early 1960s to the late 1980s (Charnock 2005). Bean (1990) found a small, but possibly important, personal vote effect at the 1987 election, but Bowler, Farrell and McAllister (1996, 461) found at the 1993 election that '... local campaigning has a very limited impact on the vote'. However, it is reasonable to suggest that the nature of the 1993 campaign (focused almost entirely on the coalition's *Fightback!* policy package) made it a less likely election at which to find large local effects.

Of course, in parliamentary systems based on single member constituencies, parties have incentives to target marginal seats, and Denemark (2000) presents an Australian case study that demonstrates the capacity of the governing party to use 'pork barrelling' disproportionately in marginal seats, something that appears to have become more common in recent decades as more programs have involved discretionary decisions. More generally, the use of a variety of methods to target marginal seats has been a feature of Australian politics for some time (e.g. Mills 1986), with ever-increasing degrees of technical sophistication (see van Onselen and Errington 2004 for a recent outline). This would be expected to provide an incumbency advantage accruing from access to resources.

The two aspects of spatial variation in voting that have been discussed most often in Australia are inter-State and urban–rural differences. However, as far as the former is concerned, despite the prominence given by the media to the connections between federal voting and State governments and party leaders, analyses both of aggregate voting data (Leithner 1997) and of individual survey data (Charnock 2003) have shown that Kemp's finding of small State-level effects has continued to hold for the balance of the post-war period, with institutional aspects, especially the representation entitlements of the States (Charnock), and the limited extent of partisan de-alignment (Leithner) being proffered as explanations.

Economic interests, institutional arrangements and values have been used by various authors to explain the existence of an urban–rural cleavage. Aitkin (1988) argued that 'countrymindedness' as an ideology had played a significant role at earlier times, but was greatly diminished by the 1980s due to both in-migration from urban areas and consolidation of holdings within the farming industry for economic reasons. Duncan and Epps (1992), however, argued that the 'demise of countrymindedness' due to in-migration was better described as being a 'dilution,' since it had not occurred in all rural areas and was quite place-specific. Kemp made one major exception to his general conclusion about increasing nationalisation, stating that differing economic interests would probably serve to continue to differentiate voting in rural areas from those in urban ones: 'The primary bases of divergence in political behaviour ... have lain not in differences of values but in differences of interest,' (Kemp 1978, 299).

The ongoing existence of the National (Country) Party might be taken as prima facie evidence of a significant urban–rural cleavage, but both Aitkin (1977, Ch. 11) and McAllister (1992, 148) place a large emphasis for its continued existence on institutional arrangements that support its coalition with the Liberal Party. To emphasise this, Aitkin (1977, 190) reports some analyses that suggest that as long ago as the late 1960s a large proportion of Country Party voters (probably at least 40%) saw no real difference between the Country and Liberal Parties. However, since then there have, at times, been serious tensions between (parts of) the two parties, most obviously when the coalition was dissolved before the 1987 election.

Much of the tension has arisen from the increased 'economic rationalist' policy agenda of the Liberals, and such things as privatisations of government enterprises and the gradual dismantling of most producer-dominated agricultural marketing arrangements have helped to maintain significant levels of rural dissatisfaction. Consequently, despite changes to the electoral redistribution system (in 1974 and, more significantly, in 1983) that initially reduced the rural electoral advantage and later turned it into a disadvantage (Hughes 1990; Charnock 1994), urban–rural differences have continued to play a significant part in Australian electoral politics, as illustrated by the rise in the late 1990s of the One Nation Party and the responses to this of the coalition parties and the ALP (e.g. running candidates under the Country Labor Party name in NSW).

On the one hand, then, there are arguments that institutional aspects and material interests have been the main underlying factors for a considerable length of time, whereas others imply a continued existence of some kind of countrymindedness, even if in a weakened form. In the latter case, there should be discoverable contextual influences on voting, in addition to ones arising from compositional social and economic differences.

One significant change in Australian politics over the past few decades that would also be expected to result in alterations in the size and/or extent of spatial influences on voting is the transformation of the ALP from what Jaensch (1989) describes as a mass party to a catch-all party, with a pragmatic, responsive agenda, rather than an expressive one. This has contributed to a degree of class and partisan de-alignment that, other things being equal, might be expected to reduce class contextual effects. It is also possible that reduced divisional-level variations would result as the ALP sought to alter its support base. Another likely outcome would be changes in the proportion of divisional-level variation that is explained by socioeconomic variables. In Britain, for example, Andersen and Heath (2002) found that the proportion of constituency-level variation in Labour vote explained by contextual and individual social class decreased significantly over the 1964–97 period.

In the remainder of this article, therefore, there are two main directions of inquiry. One is an examination of patterns of change over time in the extent of local influences on voting, interpreted in the light of the aforementioned considerations. The second is to address questions about contextual effects, in particular, to what extent have local contextual effects been maintained despite social changes that apparently favour individualism? If such contextual effects have been maintained, then what is their nature, and what are their political consequences?

Data and Methods

The statistical techniques of multilevel modelling,[2] developed as a way of accounting for the effects of data structures that are composed of different levels of units of analysis, are the most appropriate ones for analysing these issues. Some previous examples of applications of multilevel modelling to voting behaviour are Andersen and Heath (2002), Charnock (1996; 1997), Fisher (2000), Heath, Yang and Goldstein (1996), and Jones, Johnston and Pattie (1992).

[2]There are several expository texts, requiring different levels of statistical and mathematical background. In descending order of difficulty, the main ones are: Goldstein 2003; Raudenbush and Bryk 2002; Snijders and Bosker 1999; Hox 2002; and Kreft and de Leeuw 1998.

With individuals forming one level in the analysis and constituencies/electoral divisions as the other, we can reliably answer questions such as whether the extent of divisional-level effects has increased over time (for reasons of the kind outlined in the introduction), and we can also investigate the extent to which these effects result from corresponding compositional differences at the individual level. Moreover, by including divisional-level variables in the models in addition to individual-level ones, both individual and contextual effects can be studied simultaneously, thus allowing for exploration of changes in the influence of contextual social class and countrymindedness, in particular.

A basic requirement for being able to carry out these sort of analyses is that data must be available that identify the electoral divisions in which each of the individual sample respondents is located. Publicly available Australian survey data do not allow the most extensive analyses to be carried out for the entire post-war period, largely because the geographic identifiers included in the early Morgan Gallup Poll data sets do not include one for electoral divisions.[3] Also, in order to study the nature of contextual effects in detail, data on relevant characteristics are also required. The main data sources used in levels defined geographically are population censuses, which provide information on a range of social, economic and demographic aspects. Most countries hold such censuses every 10 years (and so the data can sometimes be quite distant from elections), but Australia has the advantage in this respect of censuses having been held every 5 years since 1961. However, census data availability at the level of electoral divisions is a little more recent, and geographic identifiers that allow survey data to be linked to census data at that level are only available from the 1971 census onwards.[4]

As a result of these restrictions on data availability, my analyses deal only with the period from the mid- to late 1960s onwards, roughly comparable with Andersen and Heath's (2002) British study. It can be argued that having to base analyses on census data for electoral divisions is not an ideal way of measuring relevant features of the ocal social environment. However, as observed by Andersen and Heath (2002, 127), although '... constituency is not an intimate level of community...it should still allow us to tap some of the effects of social milieu'. Furthermore, it probably gives an underestimate of the size of contextual effects because '... [i]t is likely that a more localised measure of community would show stronger contextual effects'.

In order to be consistent throughout the period under study, only ALP and Liberal–National (Country) Party coalition voters are included. Because of the changing nature over the period of the significant minor parties and the small numbers of survey respondents voting for them, this is the approach generally adopted in studies

[3]Many of these sets do, however, include a variable for the 'political complexion' of the respondent's electoral division, which can be used to construct a reasonably detailed alternative that is useful for some purposes. The resulting aggregations of divisions with similar political complexions contain an average of about three electoral divisions, and so do not give directly comparable analyses to those with levels based on individual divisions.

[4]The practical impact of this is not large, as it was only in Aitkin's 1967 survey that data to identify electoral division first began to be recorded in surveys. The National Social Science Surveys began in 1984 and the series of Australian Election Studies commenced in 1987. The gaps can be reasonably covered by using data from Age Polls. Elections from 1969 to 1975 were linked to 1971 census data; the 1977 election to the 1976 census; the 1980 and 1983 elections to the 1981 census; the elections from 1984 to 1990 to the 1986 census; the 1993 election to the 1991 census; the 1996 and 1998 elections to the 1996 census; and the 2001 and 2004 elections to the 2001 census.

of voting extending over lengthy periods and, with only a few exceptions (mainly since 1990), includes over 90% of voters. Analytical techniques used are all based on logistic regressions for ALP vote *vs* Liberal–National (Country) Party coalition vote, and multilevel estimation was carried out using the MLwiN program (Rasbash, Steele and Browne 2003). All results presented here are derived from random intercept models. Several findings are presented in terms of a pseudo r^2 measure that represents the percentage of variance in ALP voting at different levels and explained (or, by subtraction, unexplained) by the various models. The measure is described by Snijders and Bosker (1999), and is the multilevel analogue of the measure that DeMaris (2002) indicates is the best one for bivariate logistic regressions.

Results

Unlike the USA and British evidence mentioned earlier, my analyses provide no evidence that the proportion of voting variation attributable to the divisional level has increased in Australia over the period under discussion (see Fig. 1). Rather, the pattern of fluctuations over time is one that is strongly associated with political factors; specifically, at periods around the entry into the party system of a significant new minor party, divisional-level variation became noticeably larger. In Fig. 1, this is very apparent at the elections around the formations of both the Australian Democrats (1977) and Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party (1998). This kind of reaction to an important new minor party had also happened at an earlier time. As mentioned previously (see footnote 3), although separate divisional identifiers are not available for the earlier Gallup Polls, further confirmation of the impact of political factors can be obtained by making use of the divisional 'political complexion' variable for the earlier period. Analyses (not shown here) based on a level derived from this variable show a similar pattern to that of Fig. 1, with a noticeable increase in the importance of

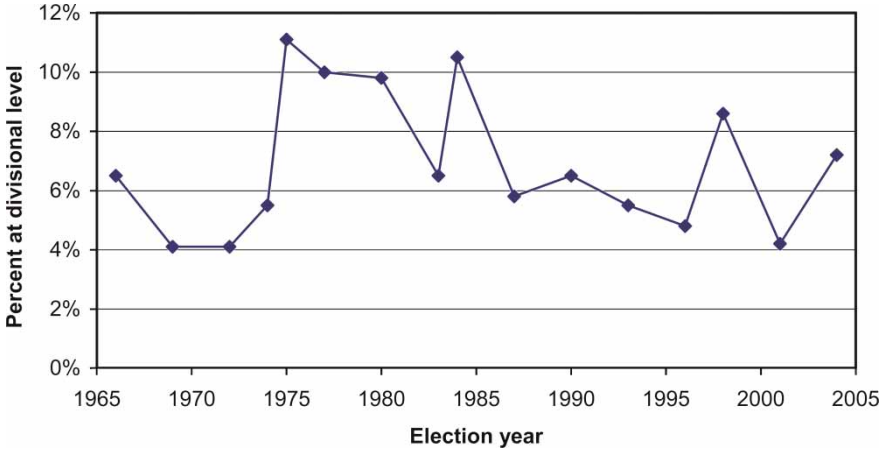

Figure 1. Divisional level variations in Australian Labor Party (ALP) voting 1966–2004.
Note: Quantities plotted are the percentages of total variance that are located at the divisional level in two level logistic regression null models for ALP voting, with individuals as level 1 and divisions as level 2.

this more localised variation at the 1958 election (the election following the formation of the Democratic Labor Party).

This relationship of increased amounts of divisional-level variation to new parties is readily understandable, because a new party would either not draw support from the ALP and Coalition in a geographically uniform manner at the divisional level or else may not run candidates in all divisions. However, of obvious practical significance is the fact that the major parties have clearly been able to successfully adapt very quickly to the new parties because, at other times, the unexplained divisional-level component is generally relatively small.

The main exception to this association of increased divisional-level variation with the emergence of new parties occurred at the 1984 election. However, it is almost certain that this, too, can be attributed to political factors. The size of the House of Representatives was expanded from 125 to 148 members between the 1983 and 1984 elections, and many of the new divisional boundaries were finalised only very close to the 1984 election date, with resulting disruptions to local party organisation.

In principle at least, it is possible that changes over time in social and demographic composition could either accentuate or reduce the extent of divisional-level variation so, before reaching firm conclusions about the importance of political factors, it is also important to make allowances for such compositional changes. As it turns out, however, models that control for a group of important individual level socio-demographic characteristics (see Fig. 2) show a very similar overall pattern to the previous one, including no evidence of a tendency to increase over the period.

There is, therefore, no support in these results for the existence of increasing local effects due to such factors as personal votes or targeted campaigning.

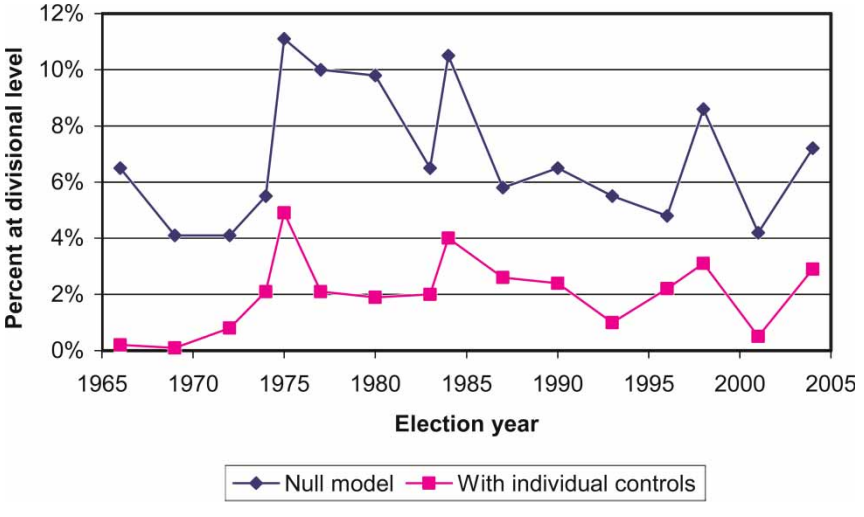

Figure 2. Divisional level variations in Australian Labor Party (ALP) voting 1966–2004, with and without individual controls. *Note:* Quantities plotted are the percentages of total variance that are located at the divisional level in two level logistic regression models for ALP voting, with individuals as level 1 and divisions as level 2. Individual level variables controlled for are age, gender, labour force status, social class, occupation, religious denomination, religious attendance, State of residence and country of birth.

Nevertheless, there is still much of interest in Fig. 2. First, the individual level socio-demographic characteristics, on average, over the whole period account for about 70% of the divisional-level variations, thus demonstrating the ongoing primary importance of these factors in understanding spatial variations in voting behaviour at the divisional level.

Second, another feature provides evidence of a very significant political dynamic, inasmuch as there is a notable difference between periods of ALP government and periods of Coalition government. In the former, the proportion of divisional-level variation accounted for by these variables tends to be considerably smaller (an average of just over 60%) than in the latter (an average of almost 80%). In other words, the proportion of divisional-level variations that remain *unexplained* by these socio-demographic factors has, on average, been almost twice as high during periods of ALP government (roughly 40% *vs* 20%).

This reflects the fact that one impact of social and economic changes and the policy reaction to these of the ALP has been to diminish the extent to which its traditional social structural base has been maintained whilst in office. Revealingly, the only election among those when the ALP was in government at which the social compositional variables explained over 65% of the divisional-level variation was one (in 1993) that revolved around radical and polarising policy alternatives that encouraged increased levels of support for the ALP from its traditional social base.[5]

What about any alterations during the period in the extent and nature of local contextual effects such as contextual social class? In the British case, all of Jones et al. (1992), Fisher (2000), and Andersen and Heath (2002) concluded from their multilevel analyses that contextual effects have a significant effect on voting. For Australia, a number of possible contextual factors for the 1993 and 1996 elections were investigated in Charnock (1996; 1997), and significant effects for all of local unemployment rates, rurality and local ethnic context were found at both elections.

For the longer period from 1969 to 2004 being studied here, the addition to the model of similar divisional-level variables (see Table 1) generally explains a substantial proportion of the remaining divisional-level variation. On average, about half is explained by the addition of these variables; furthermore, there has been no tendency for this to consistently either decrease or increase over time (see Fig. 3).

Although the overall extent of the significance of these factors as a group has not changed much over the period, what can be learned from changes in the significance of individual factors? For example, as raised in the introduction, do the results lead to the conclusion that the impact of contextual social class has declined, or that the effect of countrymindedness has decreased or even disappeared?

The short answer to both of these questions is, in fact, no, but I leave detailed discussion until the next section. Descriptively, Table 2 shows that the most consistent effect was for the local unemployment rate, which was usually significant from 1980 onwards (but only once earlier), with higher rates always favouring the ALP.

[5]Another interesting tactical aspect of the 1993 election is that, by attracting extra support from its more traditional voting base, the ALP reverted to the situation that had prevailed prior to the electoral system changes of 1983–4, a position in which it was generally disadvantaged by the spatial over-concentration of its vote (see Charnock 1994, 487).

Table 1. Description of divisional-level Census variables included in analyses

DIVUNEMP	Divisional unemployment rate (%)
DIVAGRFF	Divisional % employed in Agriculture, Fishing and Forestry
DIVOSEAS	Divisional % born overseas
DIVMOBIL	Divisional mobility rate (% resident in different address from 5 years earlier)
DIV2PARS	Divisional % of families with two parents and offspring

Somewhat similarly, the countrymindedness contextual estimated effect (as measured by DIVAGRFF) favoured the Coalition at every election, although it was large enough to be statistically significant much less often than DIVUNEMP. Interestingly, it was easily at its largest in 1974 and 1975, the last two elections at which Gough Whitlam was ALP Prime Minister. The overseas-born effect was only intermittently significant (1974/77/80/93) and its direction was not consistent, favouring the ALP and the Coalition on two occasions each.

The pattern for the effects of the residential mobility rate shows it was significant at almost every election up to 1987 (higher mobility consistently favouring the Coalition), but not significant thereafter. Finally, the 'traditional family structure' variable (DIV2PARS) is significant in 1977 and 1980 (higher values favouring the ALP) but not thereafter for a period of over two decades (until 2004, when its direction had also changed and favoured the Coalition). Unfortunately, data on this variable were not available for linking to elections earlier than 1977 and so there is no way of knowing whether there had been a previously consistent theme that ended in 1980, or whether 1977 and 1980 were unusual in some way.

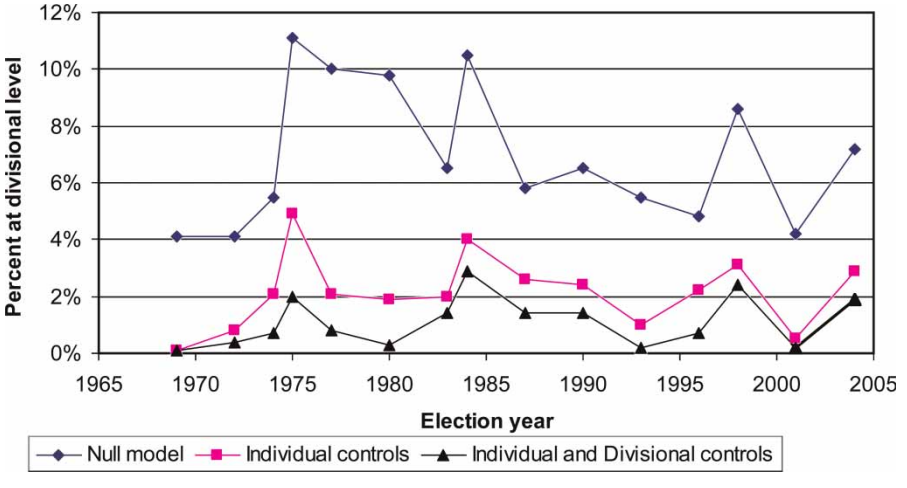

Figure 3. Divisional level variations in Australian Labor Party (ALP) voting 1969–2004, under different models. *Note:* Quantities plotted are the percentages of total variance that are located at the divisional level in two level logistic regression models for ALP voting, with individuals as level 1 and divisions as level 2. Individual level variables controlled for are age, gender, labour force status, social class, occupation, religious denomination, religious attendance, State of residence and country of birth. Divisional level variables controlled for are as listed in Table 1.

Table 2. Significance of divisional level variables 1969–2004

	DIVUNEMP	DIVAGRFF	DIVOSEAS	DIVMOBIL	DIV2PARS
1969	0.47	−0.91	0.29	−2.06*	
1972	0.60	−1.57	0.20	−1.80*	
1974	1.30	−3.37**	−2.09*	−1.93*	
1975	1.84*	−4.63**	0.32	−2.27*	
1977	1.20	−0.41	2.87**	−2.67**	2.50*
1980	3.38**	−0.64	2.90**	−2.06*	2.76**
1983	2.58**	−1.01	0.54	−1.86*	1.27
1984	2.86**	−1.58	1.50	−0.54	0.79
1987	1.51	−1.63	0.75	−2.01*	0.64
1990	3.28**	−0.26	0.40	−0.98	0.54
1993	5.45**	−1.95*	−1.98*	−1.07	1.30
1996	2.46**	−2.45**	−0.50	0.49	0.47
1998	2.53**	−0.28	−0.02	0.05	−0.22
2001	1.75*	−1.86*	−0.16	0.04	0.64
2004	0.42	−0.44	1.38	−0.69	−2.18*

Note: Significant at $^{*}P < 0.05$; $^{**}P < 0.01$. Entries in the table are t-values (estimated coefficients divided by their standard errors). Estimates are based on two-level logistic regression models as in Fig. 3. Positive values indicate increased odds of voting for the Australian Labor Party. DIVUNEMP, DIVAGRFF and DIVMOBIL tests are one-sided; DIVOSEAS and DIV2PARS tests are two-sided.

Discussion

In view of the very substantial demographic, economic and social changes that have occurred in Australia since the mid-1960s, there are strong *a priori* grounds for expecting to find that at least some of the features I discussed in the introduction would have occurred here, as in other countries. However, my results show that even the class and partisan de-alignment that has undoubtedly occurred (if more modestly than elsewhere), and the development of ever-more sophisticated methods of targeting marginal seats and 'swinging voters,' appear to have done little to disturb the structure of local competition between the ALP and Coalition. The overall extent to which voting variations are attributable to the divisional level shows none of the consistent patterns of change that would point to increasing local candidate effects or personal vote effects. Party 'brand' continues to be dominant, which can of course have consequences for democratic responsiveness at the local level.

Disruptions to the pattern appear to have been primarily due to systemic political factors, with disturbances occurring about every 20 years as significant new parties appear, but the impact of these has not been long-lasting, and the extent of divisional-level variations has generally returned to previous levels within one or two elections, as the major parties have successfully incorporated the elements represented by the new parties into their own competition. Aspects of the electoral process (in recent decades probably including public campaign funding, as well as the more often mentioned electoral system aspects of compulsory enrolment and voting and exhaustive preferential ballots) that militate against the growth of new parties are therefore extremely important in keeping the extent of divisional-level variations relatively stable at most times.

Notwithstanding reductions in the strength of the relationship between social structure and voting, most of the divisional-level variation continues to result from

compositional effects that arise from the spatially heterogeneous distribution of some of the important socioeconomic and demographic individual attributes that are known to be related to voting behaviour. Many of these are also influential in determining residential location at a quite local scale and, when a group of these attributes is controlled for, less than 30% of the divisional-level variation, on average, remains unaccounted for.[6]

The fact that this amount has tended to vary between periods of ALP and Coalition government (being about twice as high, on average, in the former) is of considerable interest because of the light it sheds on one of the consequences of policy changes made, not just by the ALP, but also by several social democratic parties internationally. Not only have they needed to appeal to a broader social base, but the tensions involved as they adopt altered policies tend to weaken the strength of existing partisan alignments.

However, the electoral and political consequences vary with the institutional context. In Britain, Andersen and Heath's (2002, 135) analyses show significant increases during the Labour government periods of 1964–70 and 1974–79 in the proportion of constituency-level variations in Labour vote unexplained by individual and contextual social class. Unlike in Australia, though, this continued to increase during the subsequent lengthy Conservative tenure, especially between 1992 and 1997, by which point it had reached a level of over 60%. Relevant British institutional aspects are the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system and the presence of a significant third party (variously Liberals/Social Democrats/Liberal Democrats) that obtained around 20% of the vote for much of the period. In Australia, of course, there was only a single occasion (the Australian Democrats in 1990) when a third party achieved even 10%. Moreover, even though the ALP lost a large number of first-preference votes to minor parties at the 1990 election, it nevertheless retained office by virtue of lower-order preferences. This contrasts with the fortunes of the NZ Labour government, which also lost substantial votes to minor parties at their 1990 election; in the context of the FPTP electoral system in place at the time, this helped to result in a significant defeat (see Denemark 1999 for a discussion of contextual effects at this election, using different methods of analysis to mine).

Considering that the addition of a small number of divisional-level factors reduces the unexplained divisional-level variation even further (on average by about half, to below 15% of its original size in the null model), there is strong evidence of the existence of significant contextual influences on voting. Moreover, there is no consistent trend over time in this amount and so it appears that the overall contextual influences are of ongoing importance in Australia, contrary to what is suggested by theories of individualism (see King 1996 for an extreme example of dismissing any role for contextual effects in explaining voting behaviour).

The nature of the significant divisional-level effects is very interesting and merits some extended discussion, especially in the light of my comments in the introduction. The most consistently significant is the local unemployment rate which, with only two exceptions, was significant at all elections from 1980 onwards. Since the aggregate relationship between vote and unemployment rate at a national level is very weak in Australia (Charnock 1995; Jackman 1995), this provides a good illustration

[6]This is rather less than in Andersen and Heath's (2002) British analyses, but drawing reliable conclusions from this comparison is not possible because my analyses control for more individual factors when compared with theirs.

of the value of multilevel modelling in being able to identify effects at various levels. It is also consistent with some research in Britain that made use of direct evaluations of economic conditions at different levels to show that voters' economic evaluations at both personal and regional levels were significant influences on vote (Pattie and Johnston 1995).

The question of how to interpret the significance of local unemployment rates is not, however, completely straightforward. Previously, it has generally been regarded (e.g. Jones et al. 1992; Charnock 1996; Fisher 2000) as an indicator of local economic prosperity, without much discussion of how that might influence voting behaviour. The most obvious suggestion would probably be that the link would work via reactions to the incumbent government (whereby more prosperous areas favour the government). However, this cannot be the explanation in Australia, since the effect has always favoured the ALP (irrespective of whether the ALP was in government or opposition).

There are, I think, two plausible alternative explanations of the finding, both of which have a class dimension. The first takes the unemployment rate as being an indicator of local economic prosperity and argues that the reason for higher unemployment rates favouring the ALP is that the ALP has been a much stronger supporter of welfare benefits and state intervention generally than have the coalition parties.[7] The fact that the largest effect for this variable was in the *Fightback!* focused election of 1993, despite unemployment then being at a post-war high of 11% and the ALP having been in office for a decade, provides quite strong support for this interpretation.

The second possible explanation for the significance of local unemployment rates focuses on understanding the results directly in terms of differences in the social class composition of electoral divisions, with the contextual effect of living in an area with higher proportions of working-class residents being to increase the chances of voting ALP. This explanation obviously assumes the existence of an association between social class composition and unemployment rates, which is, in fact, the case during the relevant period.[8]

The argument that there is no countrymindedness contextual effect, over and above individual-level compositional factors such as occupation, age, religion and ethnic background, is not supported by these results. Although not statistically significant as often as DIVUNEMP, the estimated DIVAGRFF effect favours the Liberal–National Coalition at every one of the elections over the period and there is no trend for it to decrease in size. The pattern of significant effects is, however, very revealing. With the exception of 2001, they all occurred during periods when the ALP was in government and I think it is reasonable to conclude that it has predominantly been policies and/or personalities of ALP governments that have led to this effect being activated in an important way. Ultimately, the large defeats of the Whitlam and Keating governments (in 1975 and 1996, respectively) both coincided with this effect being at its highest point in the respective periods.

[7]This perception has been in place since at least the beginning of the period under study here (see, for example, Aitkin 1977, Ch. 4).

[8]Although it is not possible to replicate for the full period the Goldthorpe contextual class schema based on occupation as used by Andersen and Heath, Australian census data from the mid-1970s until the mid-1980s shows ecological correlations at divisional level between unemployment rates and occupational structure variables (similar to some of the extremes of the Goldthorpe schema) generally in the range 0.3–0.4. In the later years these correlations were larger (0.5–0.6).

It is possible that one can take this argument even further and suggest that since it was the Hawke elections as Prime Minister that showed the weakest corresponding estimated effects during periods of ALP government (none are quite statistically significant), having an ALP government led by a Prime Minister with strong centralising tendencies (a description that applies to both Whitlam and Keating but not to Hawke) has been a recipe for eventual serious failure associated with bringing this contextual effect into play strongly. If so, there is not only a cautionary tale here for the ALP, but also an important extra consideration to add to our understanding of Australian electoral history.

The fact that the effect of higher residential mobility rates at a divisional level consistently worked against the ALP until 1987, but was thereafter non-significant, helps in clarifying previous debates about voting behaviour in the earlier period. Kemp (1978, Ch. 4) argued for the existence of a politically conservative 'suburban effect' and suggested that this might be a contextual effect. My results here are certainly consistent with this,[9] because many studies of urban residential differentiation at the time (see, for example, Logan et al. 1975) showed that higher residential mobility was associated with suburbanisation. A reasonable argument as to how this might be the result of social context is that the association of higher residential mobility with more diffuse social networks (which would have been accentuated at times of extensive suburbanisation) would mean that the effect of local social milieu would be different from that in more stable communities, but that the impact might be more significant for the working class than for the middle class (whose social networks already tended to be more diffuse).

Andersen and Heath (2002) also found something similar in Britain; that is, they concluded that the effect of contextual social class on voting Conservative was stronger for manual workers than for non-manual ones until the late 1970s, and suggested a similar explanation to mine. Changes in the strength of the relationship between class and vote (see Goot 1994; Weakliem and Western 1999) and in the nature of support for the ALP as it modified or discarded many of its traditional policies readily explain why this effect became non-significant in Australia after the late 1980s.

That the overseas-born effect was inconsistent in direction and only sporadically significant is probably unsurprising, given the large changes in the balance of source countries for immigrants that have occurred over the period. In the mid-1960s, a common pattern was for over half of arriving settlers to be from the UK or Ireland, with about another quarter being from Southern Europe and very few from Asia. By the late 1980s and early 1990s this had radically altered, with around 40–50% being from Asia and less than 20% from the UK and Ireland.

To capture any corresponding contextual effects, this means it would probably be necessary to use more specific, regionally defined measures of ethnic composition and, moreover, to use different ones at different times. McAllister and Kelley (1983), for example, found it necessary to use three such measures, all of which at that time were related to Europe and the Middle East. Similarly, there appeared to be an anti-Asian contextual effect at both of the 1993 and 1996 elections (Charnock 1997), which could be seen as a precursor to the initial electoral success of ONP.

[9]However, as lack of suitable data meant it was not possible to include an individual level variable for residential mobility in my analyses, it is also possible that some or all of the effect results from compositional differences at the individual level.

The friendship networks and associations that develop through children and schools offer prima facie evidence that significance of the 'traditional family structure' variable (DIV2PARS) could indicate the existence of a contextual effect. However, no equivalent individual-level data are available, and so it is not possible to be sure if an observed significant effect for DIV2PARS results from individual-level compositional differences or from a genuine contextual effect (or both).[10]

Conclusions

Whilst spatial variations in electoral behaviour have, in many countries, increased in size over the latter part of the post-WWII period, the evidence here shows no such tendency in Australia, despite the fact that this country has been through comparable demographic, economic and social changes. Neither weakening class and partisan alignments nor increased potential advantages of incumbency resulting from access to resources and more sophisticated targeted campaigning techniques have led to increases in the extent of local variations at the constituency level. Rather, although divisional-level variations are of much more importance than those at the State level (on average, by a factor of about 10), the size of this component has fluctuated over time.

The principal pattern of significance has been a tendency to increase temporarily at periods around the entry into the party system of significant minor parties. However, the size has also generally decreased again very quickly, providing strong evidence that the major parties have been flexible enough over a lengthy period to succeed in incorporating the elements represented by such minor parties into the pattern of competition between themselves.[11] In my view, the single most convincing explanation for this unusualness of the Australian experience lies in the institutional structure, several aspects of which appear to have the effect of dampening the responsiveness of voting behaviour to economic and social changes. In practice, features such as compulsory enrolment and voting and exhaustive preferential voting have combined with the federal structures and flexibility of the major parties in ways that seem to have resulted in an almost self-correcting mechanism and a substantial degree of medium- and even long-term inertia.

My finding that a large proportion (an average of over 70%) of divisional-level variation has consistently been a fairly straightforward reflection of the differential distribution between electoral divisions of long-studied individual level social and economic characteristics associated with voting behaviour, such as social class and religion, reflects the ongoing significance of these factors as influences on voting. The important discovery that they accounted for considerably less during periods of ALP government than they did in periods of Coalition government illustrates a common difficulty faced by several social democratic parties during this period, with reliance on its traditional social base being less possible for the ALP than for the Coalition. However, the persistence of the importance of this component over time (albeit at average lower levels than during Coalition governments) again marks the Australian situation as different from the nearest (and, as

[10]See Charnock (2006) for a detailed discussion of this aspect at the 2004 election.

[11]At this stage it is difficult to judge whether the performance and positioning of the Australian Greens at recent elections (Charnock and Ellis 2003; 2004) indicates that this situation has (or is about to) change somewhat.

yet, the only vaguely comparable) international comparison—in Britain, over the period 1964–97, Andersen and Heath (2002, 134–5) report a 'more or less steady decline' in the amount of constituency voting for the Labour Party accounted for by individual and contextual social class. Differences between the countries in electoral institutional structures again seem to provide the most convincing explanation, with the Australian framework helping to provide a lower limit to the extent of decline (*cf.* Charnock 2005, 352).

Theories relating to individualisation and voting, arguing for reduced (or even non-existent) impact of contextual effects on voting behaviour, find no support here. It is, for example, difficult to think of an equally satisfactory explanation for the longstanding significant effect of divisional unemployment rates in addition to the equivalent individual-level variable. Although not present as often, the same is true for the countrymindedness effect and the ethnicity effect found on occasions. In all these instances, there are revealing and convincing political explanations and/or concomitants. On average, the small set of such divisional variables examined here account for around 15% of divisional-level variations in voting and because of the marginal nature of many Australian electorates, the practical impact of the influence on voting of such effects can be quite significant.

The most longstanding one was for the local unemployment rate. This has always favoured the ALP and is consistent with either of two related interpretations: one regarding it as indicating a 'local economic prosperity' effect that works indirectly through perceptions of differences in the major parties' stances on government intervention and social welfare provisions, and the other as indicating a contextual social class effect. The second of these would be the equivalent of Andersen and Heath's (2002) argument for the presence in Britain of an ongoing contextual effect of social class, but the first interpretation also obviously involves a class element.

Similarly, in the debate over the existence of countrymindedness as a contextual element influencing voting, my results support those who suggest its continued presence (favouring the Coalition), but in a weakened form. The study of how it has changed over time has added some very revealing conclusions, with considerable potential electoral importance. Significant corresponding effects were present at only a minority of elections, but almost all during periods of ALP government. Once activated, it has had very important political consequences, since such periods have concluded with the very large electoral defeats of ALP governments in 1975 and 1996. More recently, the ALP has made at least cosmetic efforts to minimise this effect; judgement as to whether or not this survives a future period in government must await events.

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