

Last week Ian McAuley asked why Labor's primary vote has been gradually falling for 70 years. The answers are in – and there are a few surprises among the familiar criticisms

Last week I posed a question about the long-term fall in Labor's primary vote. Many responses have come in – some perhaps from party members, some from those whose main interest is living in a healthy democracy with strong political parties (no one said Labor should give up or disappear). My summary of responses, gathered into themes, using direct quotes as much as possible, follows.

1. Economic change

The strongest interpretation is that society and its economic structures have been changing, but Labor in its own structures and policies has not kept pace. Australia is “slowly developing into a post-industrial economy” but Labor is “built for an industrial world”.

“Over a century you would expect society to change and political parties to change with them”, but the strong message is that Labor has not changed enough. “Labor has failed to track the children and grandchildren of its pre-1940s working class believers”.

The suggestions that the old union-based structure is out of date are not criticisms of unions themselves; rather, they are about the way economic structural change has left unions representative of a shrinking group. In fact, the success of the union movement has resulted in a situation in which “there are ... enough legislated protections for workers that many see no need for unions or are too young to realise that bosses just didn't give them sick leave and holidays from the goodness of their hearts”.

The old concentrated workplaces, so favourable to unionisation, have largely disappeared. Thanks to technological change “the means of production are now widely distributed”, and the “working class have become sole traders and others who are self-employed”. “White collar workers are less likely to identify as working class, particularly as living standards continue to increase”. In fact, it was “the reforms of Hawke and Keating that paved the way for so much of this prosperity”.

“More money and economic shifts ... have turned the old working class into a new middle class, an ‘embourgeoisement’” We are “no longer battling” and “we certainly don't want to punish the rich with higher taxes or the like, because we are on our way there”.

Another comment is about population ageing, “and older people tend to be more conservative”. (A comment that begs the question “why?”. We know it happens, but what could cause someone to switch their political outlook as he or she ages?)

At the other end of the age spectrum is reference to the “disengagement of the young”, which is seen as “frightening”, and another person refers to the millions of potential voters who are not enrolled, have not voted, or have spoiled their ballots.

2. Labor as Coalition-lite

There are strong comments about Labor's movement away from social-democratic ideals.

“Workers and the poor are slowly but surely deserting Labor because Labor has slowly and surely deserted the worker”. Labor has become “an echo chamber for neoliberal economics”. Because of Labor's “careen to the right”, many “rightfully see no difference in the major parties so vote for a real right wing party”. And “why embrace half-baked neoliberals when you can have the real viciousness of the Libs?”

While respondents have clearly acknowledged the influences of economic change, there is little suggestion that this move to the right is in response to some endogenous community move to the right. (Just one person suggested that immigration may have contributed to a shift towards material acquisition.)

Rather, responses are about a manufactured consensus – a “virulent political propaganda from an increasingly homogenous media, populist rhetoric about refugees, greenies and various other social groups who are alleged to be stealing the rightful entitlements of ‘real’ Australians” and the “huge resourcing of the propaganda declaimed and disseminated by the new right wing forces which now control the Liberal Party” and “misrepresentation, prevarication and weaselling typical of [Labor's] opponents in misleading citizens”.

3. Other policy issues

There were no statements suggesting that Labor governments have spent too much on health, education and other public services and that it should have reduced taxes instead.

Rather, the comments are about a policy vacuum: “Labor has no standing anymore in terms of what they believe in or what they are trying to achieve”; there is “no ethical or moral stand visible”; “Labor long ago lost its ideological mojo. There is no longer any clear conceptualisation of what the party stands against; nor understanding, let alone good communication, of what the stakes are for its prospective members and supporters”.

Having alienated its “core supporters”, Labor has been “simply going along with whatever was popular in the polls”, and when you “run second in the race to get the ‘what’s in it for me’ voters, you are gone”.

4. The failure of the left

Looking through the comments, I find two strands of thoughts about “left” or “progressive” politics. One is that the Labor Party should be the focus of such movements; the other is that these movements properly reside outside the party structure.

That latter view breaks down further. One view is that the left is strong: it’s “out there in social and environmental movements”, but that its members are disappointed with the Labor Party. The other is that the “left” is fragmented in small splinter groups and is lacking solidarity: “there is no intellectual left consensus” and there has been “a failure to build capacity in our broad left community”.

Some point to the difficulty of appealing to the “intellectual left” while not offending the “remnant working class”. There is no longer a “working class intellectual culture”.

“A philosophical millstone hanging around the progressive neck is the role of the state in a modern economy”.

5. The Labor machine

“Labor has become a party of professional politicians, careerists, opportunists and flakes”; “So many in the ALP seem to be in it for personal gain only, whereas the other side are more likely to be true believers in insane ideology”; Labor has “a dynastic approach where generations of Labor politicians have the same name. We might as well have a monarchy of our own”.

Some commentators seem to be party members less than enchanted by their role: “The only impact branch meetings have is on minor placements in the party organisation, mainly in the interest of professional careers” and “its fabled branches have become what?” One describes the party as “leaden”. No one refers to the long-term decline in membership – perhaps it is too obvious to mention.

One mentions “an over-emphasis by the left on parliamentary activity to the exclusion of all else”; politics occurs in the electorate, not only in Parliament.

6. Competition and the Greens

Many point out that much of the Labor primary vote has gone to the Greens. “The disenchanted left now has somewhere else to go”, and “the Greens have effectively bled off much of the progressive wing of the ALP”.

Some see Labor as “fighting a war on two fronts”, losing the “relatively prosperous and humane intelligentsia” to the Greens, and on the other side to the Coalition, which is “amorphously reclaiming territory traditionally held by the ALP: the populist, belly-feel vote”.

A broad question raised by some respondents is whether this matters for Labor. Perhaps it can follow the lead of the Liberal Party, which governs in coalition with the National Party; no one sees the Liberal primary vote (which is actually lower than Labor’s) as problematic. And one respondent asks what is problematic about having more political parties with real differences in policy ideas.

7. Advice

Although the exercise is about analysing a long-term trend, people understandably find that in so doing they offer advice about the party's future directions. Because most advice flows out of the above points I don't try to cover them all. Some recurrent themes are:

- to develop a clear relationship with the Greens – suggestions ranging from an “entente cordiale” through to a formal coalition;
- to give more say to party members: “members and supporters must feel that they have some agency in their engagement with the party – that they can make a difference, however slightly” and to give more say to the broader community, perhaps through citizens' juries;
- to push a strong agenda around providing public goods and compensating for market failures – health care, NBN, education, carbon pricing, public transport, environment protection, generally “defending the role of government in society in a social democratic sense”;
- to develop services for those workers – self-employed, casually-employed – who are outside the reach of unions;
- to have good candidates connected with the community (a point which has become clearer in the post-election analysis): “no more celebrity candidates parachuted into electorates”; “if we have to wait for another messiah to turn up to lead them then we might as well put the cue in the rack for another decade”;
- to articulate a coherent, alternative narrative to the Coalition's, and to develop principle-based policies from day one in Opposition.

I trust I've done justice to people's contributions. The original piece including the comments are available. And please keep this conversation going – it's important.