Routledge Advances in International Relations and Global Politics

AUSTRALIAN POLITICS AT A CROSSROADS

PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

Edited by
Matteo Bonotti and Narelle Miragliotta

Australian Politics at a Crossroads

As the 21st century proceeds apace, Australia faces new and old challenges, both domestically and internationally. These include managing complex governance issues, preventing democratic fracture, balancing an ever-shifting geopolitical strategic order, addressing the recognition and identity demands of marginalised groups, and responding to crises and urgent policy challenges, such as climate change.

Bonotti, Miragliotta, and the other contributors to this volume analyse and evaluate the challenges which confront Australia by locating them in their national and comparative context. The various contributions reveal that while these challenges are neither novel nor unique to Australia, the way in which they manifest and Australia's responses to them are shaped by the country's distinctive history, culture, geography, location, and size.

The chapters offer a cutting-edge analysis of these pressing challenges faced by Australia and offer reflections on how to address them. The book is a valuable resource for scholars and students of Australian politics, and of comparative politics in a global perspective.

Matteo Bonotti is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at Monash University. His research interests include political liberalism, linguistic justice, free speech, civility, food justice, and democratic theory. His work has appeared in journals such as the *American Political Science Review*, the *Journal of Politics,* the *British Journal of Political Science,* and *Political Studies*. He is the author of *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* (Oxford University Press, 2017), the co-author of *Healthy Eating Politics and Political Philosophy: A Public Reason Approach* (Oxford University Press, 2021) and *Recovering Civility during COVID-19* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), and the co-editor of *A Century of Compulsory Voting in Australia: Genesis, Impact and Future* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

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Introduction

Matteo Bonotti and Narelle Miragliotta

As the 21st century proceeds apace, Australia faces new and old challenges, both domestically and internationally. These include managing complex governance issues, preventing democratic fracture, balancing an ever-shifting geopolitical strategic order, addressing the recognition and identity demands of marginalised groups, and responding to crises and urgent policy challenges, such as climate change. These challenges are, of course, not exclusive to Australia but are symptomatic of a world in constant flux. However, a country's distinctive history, culture, geography, location, and size inevitably shape the way in which these challenges manifest and the kind of responses that country devises to address them. This collection provides cutting-edge analysis of these pressing challenges from an Australian perspective. It situates these challenges within Australia's domestic, regional, and international context and offers reflections on addressing them. The volume is organised into four thematic sections.

The chapters in Part I analyse the condition of some of Australia's democratic institutions. In Chapter 1, Narelle Miragliotta and Finley Watson examine the Australian federal party system, identifying the forces that are altering it and contemplating the possible implications of these changes for Australian democracy. The authors conclude that although Australia's two-party system is no longer as predictable as it once was, this does not translate into a democracy in crisis.

In Chapter 2, Alan Fenna reflects on the strains within Australia's modern federal system and considers the factors giving rise to these challenges; how they compare with those affecting other similar federations; potential solutions to them; and the likely obstacles to reform. Fenna notes that recent crises and policy demands have exposed both the strengths and the weaknesses of Australian federalism. Building on that analysis, he highlights three ongoing challenges: the way roles and responsibilities are divided and shared; the system's fiscal foundations; and intergovernmental relations.

Chapter 3, by Paul Strangio and James Walter, explores the nature of contemporary political leadership and its impact on Australian democracy. The authors ask whether dysfunctional political leadership is the cause of Australia's governance problems or a symptom of strains within the political system. Strangio and Walter ultimately argue that the performative and practical failures of political leadership

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have arisen because the institutions that once constrained and restrained leaders—e.g. strong party organisations, robust parliamentary practices, and an independent public service—have been eroded. Yet they see in the attempts to practice an inclusive and collegial form of leadership by the present Labor government the potential of a 'new politics' better attuned to contemporary challenges.

Concerns about the state of Australia's political institutions exist alongside fears of changes in political attitudes and the weakening of citizen and elite commitment to public virtues, the focus of Section 3 of this volume. In Chapter 4, Josh Holloway and Rob Manwaring revisit the debate about declining political trust. Drawing on a survey of 1,500 participants, complemented by focus group data, Holloway and Manwaring offer a new analysis of institutional trust in Australia. Their findings affirm the long-term decline of political trust in Australia, also revealing that citizens' trust levels and responses are nuanced and vary depending on the public institution in question.

Trust is also a central theme in Chapter 5. Frank Algra-Maschio and Robert Thomson examine this topic through the lens of parties election commitments. Low levels of trust, the authors point out, are often associated with a belief that politicians break their election promises. Yet, the evidence shows that governing parties tend to keep their promises. By focusing on two Australian case studies—the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Gillard minority government's promise not to introduce a carbon tax and the Morrison-led Coalition government's promise to introduce a national integrity commission—Algra-Maschio and Thomson propose that this gap between the public's perception of promise-breaking and parties' strong record of promise-keeping lies in the ambiguity of what constitutes an election promise, what counts as promise fulfilment, and the ways in which the opposition and the media exacerbate this ambiguity. They conclude by considering possible options to remedy the often incorrect perception of politicians as promise-breakers.

In Chapter 6, Zim Nwokora explores the vexed issue of political integrity via an examination of the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) established by the ALP government in July 2023. Analysing the written submissions to a parliamentary inquiry that preceded the establishment of the NACC, Nwokora maps the diversity of stakeholder views about what the NACC ought to do, what the scope of its powers should be, and what role it should play in Australia's system of government. He argues that the different positions held by stakeholders on these matters can be traced back to different priorities among competing fundamental political values. Nwokora suggests that the existence and persistence of these different views are likely to also shape the future pressures on the NACC.

Chapter 7, by Matteo Bonotti and Steven T. Zech, shifts the attention to the public virtue of civility. Bonotti and Zech observe that civility facilitates social and political interaction in liberal democracies, but that there are concerns about its deterioration. The authors explore this issue through two case studies: the 2022 Australian federal election and public debate concerning access closure at the Uluru monolith, a site sacred to the Aṉangu people. Through the analysis of these two cases, Bonotti and Zech illustrate the ways in which civility and incivility can manifest in the demos. They make three important claims: first, that civility can sometimes be employed by powerful actors to control and oppress marginalised

groups and that therefore, in such cases, responding with incivility can be appropriate or even desirable; second, that being civil often depends on the context and requires the ability to judge whether, when, and how to be (un)civil, especially where there are disagreements regarding civility norms; third, that civic education should play a greater role in helping younger citizens particularly to understand the value of civility in Australian public life.

The chapters in Section 3 explore policy challenges that are central to Australia's domestic and international agenda. In Chapter 8, Nathan Fioritti and Robert Thomson examine Australia's response to the climate crisis. The authors point out that a critical decade for climate action has largely been wasted, and that since the repeal of the *Clean Energy Act* in 2013, denial and delay have dominated the country's approach at the federal level. Fioritti and Thomson consider how, in the time left to act, Australia might move on from the denial and delay of the past and rise to the urgency of the climate challenge. Their analysis reveals that Australian governments are being increasingly buffeted by cross-cutting forces that both stymie and demand governmental action. Fioritti and Thomson conclude by considering the potential for an improved governmental response to the climate crisis.

In Chapter 9, Matthew Lister considers the challenges and frustrations associated with Australia's refugee programme and family migration systems. Lister explores the growth of 'two-tier' refugee programmes, and the consequences of the differential treatment provided to refugees who enter with a valid visa compared to those who enter without authorisation. Lister explains why this distinction is both illegitimate and undesirable. He concludes the chapter by exploring problems with the current family migration regime and by proposing modifications to make this programme not only more efficient but also better able to protect citizens' fundamental rights.

In Chapter 10, Eleanor Gordon, Samanthi J. Gunawardana, and Lauren Lowe explore the continuities and changes in Australia's approach to international development in the Asia-Pacific region. They focus on the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the sector's engagement with the localisation agenda and its confrontation with the complex challenge of acknowledging and reshaping power relations. The authors conclude by providing recommendations on how the Australian state can address these historical deficits in its approach to international development and advance decolonisation and localisation processes through the proposed First Nations Foreign Policy.

Chapter 11, by Rémy Davison, shifts the attention to Australia's use of strategic partnerships (SPs) to advance its geopolitical security interests. Davison examines how Australia is leveraging the AUKUS strategic partnership to prioritise specific defence and security goals. He shows how Australia's use of SPs is consistent with a much wider global and regional turn to a more flexible, less institutionalised approach to defence and foreign policy among states in response to an increasingly volatile international order. Davison argues that the AUKUS agreement is the most ambitious long-term defence integration project undertaken by Washington, London, and Canberra, and (re)affirms Australia's close relationship to traditional allies.

In Chapter 12, Marianne Hanson and Maria Rost Rublee examine Australia's response to the non-proliferation and disarmament global agenda. Hanson and Rublee point to the duality of Australia's position on nuclear weapons. While Australia claims to be a champion of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament and has put forward several useful initiatives, it clings closely to the US nuclear umbrella, a position that runs counter to its claims of advocating for a world without nuclear weapons. Hanson and Rublee further argue that recent geopolitical developments, especially the rise of China, have exacerbated Canberra's reliance on Washington, prompting the AUKUS pact. They conclude that closer attention to its ASEAN and South Pacific neighbours, together with genuine actions to support a nuclear-free world, will serve Australia well, and suggest initial steps that Australia can take to minimise the nuclear dangers present in the world today.

Section 4 of this volume explores how Australia is responding to systemic social problems. In Chapter 13 Nicholas Barry focuses on income inequality. He examines why income inequality is a policy problem, explains why it is unjust, and illustrates its negative social and economic effects. He analyses the increase in household inequality in Australia over the last four decades before explaining its causes, highlighting the impact of job polarisation and greater inequality in wages and salaries. Although these changes, Barry observes, are partly the result of technological development, policy choices—particularly those relating to industrial relations and the tax-transfer system—have also played a key role in producing them. Barry argues that the decline in union density, the lack of centre-left electoral success over recent decades, and the highly targeted nature of the Australian welfare state have created inhospitable conditions for deeper and more comprehensive egalitarian policy reform.

While income inequality constitutes a significant challenge for Australia, inequality can also manifest in opportunities to participate in politics. In Chapter 14, Luke Dean, Zareh Ghazarian, and Katrina Lee-Koo consider this problem by examining the experiences of young Australians seeking elective office. The authors analyse the experiences of 20 young local government councillors. Their research identifies three key factors that shape the experience of young Australians contesting local office: (1) limited awareness on the role of local government, (2) lack of campaign resources and support, and (3) identity politics.

In Chapter 15, Blair Williams examines the persistence of gender inequality in Australia, starting from the observation that while Australia was once a leader in advancing gender equality, it has fallen dramatically in the global gender gap index in recent years. Williams explores how Australia lost its way on gender equality, how neoliberal policies have had an impact on women and society, and how the country can once again take the lead on progressing meaningful opportunities for women.

In Chapter 16, Paul Muldoon examines the complexities of the proposed Indigenous Voice to Parliament that was rejected by a majority of Australian citizens in a referendum in October 2023. Through the concept of the 'multi-nation', Muldoon considers the implications that this 'constitutional' change could have had for Australian democracy. Specifically, Muldoon reflects upon what the proposed Voice might have meant for democracy, had the 'voice of the people' (the sovereign

parliament) been required to listen to another voice, and the demos conceded that it would no longer be one people.

The legacy of colonialism in Australia is also central to Chapter 17, the book's concluding chapter, in which Ben Wellings examines the debate on monarchy and the republic through the lens of post-colonial and decolonial critiques of monarchy. Wellings argues that modern Australian republicanism must accommodate the more secessionist-inclined frames of the decolonial critique to create the contingent alliances that will be necessary for the republican position to eventually succeed.

Together, the chapters in this collection provide analysis of the challenges that Australia faces, explain how the country has responded to them, and advances thoughtful suggestions for addressing them.

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Part I

Australian Governance and Its Challenges

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1 A Party System in Crisis?

Assessing the State of the Australian Federal Party System

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Introduction

The received wisdom is that a healthy democracy depends on the stability of its parties and the party system in which they cooperate and compete. Four key ideas have shaped much of our understanding about the ideal relationship across democracy, parties, and party systems. The first is that institutionalised parties are critical democratic interlocutors that create the necessary conditions for

> democratic governability and legitimacy by facilitating legislative support for government policies; by channelling demands and conflicts through established procedures; by reducing the scope for populist demagogues to win power; and by making the democratic process more inclusive, accessible, representative, and effective.
>
> (Diamond 1997: xxiii)

Second, establishment parties are reliable fixtures of the party system that attract and maintain reliable levels of popular support within the electorate, something which helps to nurture voters' deep attachment to the political system and reduce electoral volatility. The longevity of establishment parties is linked to the affective and organisational advantages they derive in being able to trace their origins to their state's modern democratic founding (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Third, the structure of the party system, in reflecting or embodying 'power relations among societal groups' (Nwokora and Pelizzo 2015: 454), affects the wider competitive dynamics and impacts many different dimensions of political life (Valentim and Dinas 2023: 1–2). Fourth, two-party systems have generally been regarded as more accountable (APSA 1950), natural (Duverger 1964), and stable than multiparty systems.

In recent decades, however, these ideas have been challenged by the natural course of events. While the belief in the centrality of parties to the democratic project remains sacrosanct, parties are the object of increased disappointment, whether because of concerns about their growing detachment from civil society (Katz and Mair 1995) or the electoral success of anti-establishment parties that seemingly disavow liberal democratic institutions (Taggart 2002). Questions about the

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performance of parties have occurred against the backdrop of newer research that is challenging conventional understanding about the centrality of (institutionalised) parties to democratic endurance (Casal Bértoa 2017). The stability of party systems (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) in old democracies has also been strained by the emergence of a new postmodern political cleavage, the struggle experienced by many establishment parties to respond to the issues that this new cleavage has unleashed, and the spread of more inclusive electoral regimes, such as proportional representation, that more accurately translates vote share into seat share. Such conditions have created demand for new parties and opportunities for insurgent parties to convert latent support into legislative representation. These developments have led to concerns about the decline in vote and seat share among establishment parties, party system fragmentation (Best 2013: 317–20; Lisi 2019), and the growth of ideological and affective polarisation (Reiljan 2020).

This chapter investigates whether there are indications of these developments in the Australian federal party system. We narrow our attention to the phenomenon of party system fragmentation. We have selected 1951 as our starting point because it is the first election in which the modern federal party system substantially consolidated (Rawson 1964). Our findings suggest that the format of the Australian federal party system is evolving in a way that is broadly resonant with developments in comparable democratic settings, although the extent of the drift towards multipartyism is gradual and modest, especially in the House of Representatives (House). We propose that this softening in the rigidity of the two-party system has the potential to enhance Australian politics by more accurately reflecting the political pluralism of contemporary Australian society.

The Australian Federal Party System and Its Strains

One of the oldest continuous modern democracies, Australia has most of the features associated with an ideal party system by conventional standards. Its federal party system, similar to the sub-national party systems that characterise the Australian federation, is dominated by two main party groupings. Although scholars debate whether it is accurately described as a two-party or two-and-a-half party system, Australia's party system is, nevertheless, practically organised around a Labor vs. anti-Labor cleavage. The anti-Labor grouping, composed of the Liberal and the Nationals (the Coalition), has operated in a stable alliance since 1923, long before the consolidation of the modern Liberals in the 1940s. Giovanni Sartori (1976: 268) contends that the continuity and durability of the coalition arrangement in Australia has produced a two-party rather than a multiparty system (but see Siaroff 2003). Labor and the Coalition have more or less alternated in office since the foundation of the federal party system.

Despite the federal party system's proclivity to stable two-partyism, shifts in the orientations of voters have been observed and present a challenge to its underlying structure (Charnock and Ellis 2003; Marsh 1996). Voter orientations, which have historically buttressed the two-party system, are changing, with declining voter willingness to regularly vote for the same party (from 72 percent in 1967 to 37 percent

in 2022) and the increase in electors who have considered voting for another party (from 25 percent in 1987 to 36 percent in 2022). Partisanship is also waning, as expressed by decline in the number of 'very strong partisans' (from 33 percent in 1967 to 20 percent in 2022) and a corresponding rise in the number of 'not very strong' partisans' (from 23 percent in 1967 to 30 percent in 2022), although levels of 'fairly strong' partisanship remains broadly stable (Cameron and McAllister 2022). Moreover, changes in voter behaviour appear to reflect generational shifts. Compared to the depression/war generation of voters, who contributed to the historical stability of the party system, replacement generations have shown a greater willingness to vote for non-major parties (Martin and Pietsch 2013).

There are other indicators of a changing Australian electorate. As Figure 1.1 shows, the major party primary vote in House and Senate elections is in decline. Prior to 2010, Labor and the Liberals easily won more than 80 percent of the total national House primary vote, with each party attracting upwards of 40 percent of the first preference vote. However, the minor party and independent vote has been steadily increasing, especially since the late 1990s. The decline in the Liberal and Labor first preference Senate vote began to occur two decades earlier, with the combined minor party and independent first preference vote achieving consistent double-digit outcomes since the 1970s (see also Fenna and Manwaring 2021).

Of course, such developments do not automatically produce a change in the prevailing party system dynamics. In the next section we assess whether the traditional two-party system is shifting towards multipartyism in a manner consistent with trends in comparable settings. Scholars use a range of measures to assess party system change, such as volatility (changing vote shares), polarisation (changes in the ideological distancing or spaces between relevant parties), fragmentation (changes in the number of parties), and disproportionality (the difference between party vote shares and seat share). We focus on fragmentation and disproportionality. Fragmentation enables us to assess changes to the format of the party system, while disproportionality helps us to identify the extent to which fragmentation is being masked by electoral system effects.

To assess fragmentation in the Australian federal party system we apply Laakso and Taageperas' (1979) *effective number of parties* (ENP) measurement. The ENP measurement was developed to provide a relative indication of the number of parties which contest elections and a stable point of comparison for consideration of changing party strength and electoral systems. This formula accounts for the relative size, vote, and seat share of the parties which contest elections, and provides an operationalisable criterion for determining the number of parties which are most likely to impact party system dynamics (Laakso and Taagepera 1979: 43). The calculation provides an indication of the degree of party fragmentation in a given system by allocating parties which receive the highest proportion of either votes or seats a greater weighting. The ENP generates a number that is smaller than the exact number of parties contesting an election, but this number is argued to be much more indicative of the size of the party system (Wolinetz 2006: 5). ENP for both parliamentary seats (Ns) and votes (Nv) are calculated through the formula

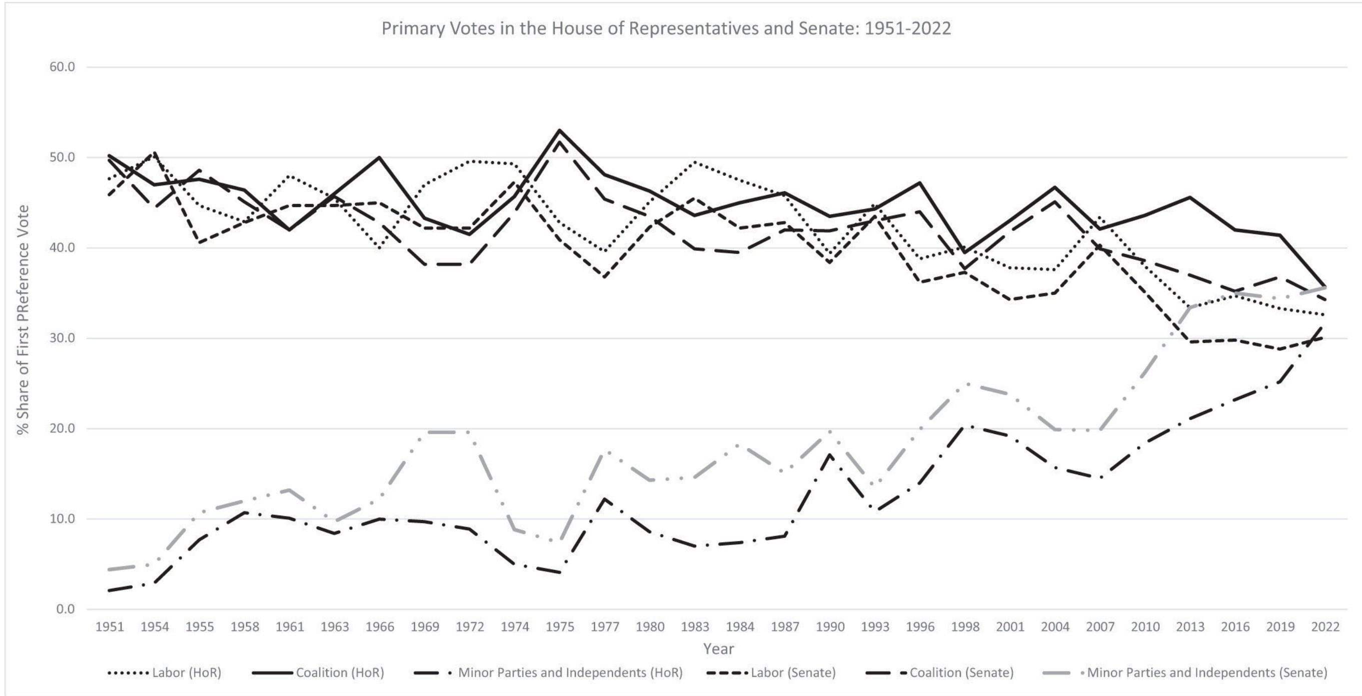

Figure 1.1 Primary Votes in the House of Representatives, 1951–2022.

$ENP = \frac{1}{\Sigma\left(Pv\right)^2}$, where Pv is the normalised percentage of either votes or seats for a particular party (Gallagher and Mitchell 2005).

To measure disproportionality, we apply Gallagher's (1991) 'least squares index' (LSq) measure of *disproportionality* to electoral data. Disproportionality is the difference between party vote share and party seat share which necessarily emerges depending on how proportional (or not) the electoral system is (Taagepera and Grofman 2003). The level of disproportionality enables us to assess if shifts in seat share accurately reflect shifts in voter preferences or if such shifts are being constrained by the electoral system.

The LSq measures the disparity that the electoral system produces between vote and seat share, and the nature of the disparity, with the index recording a greater level of disproportionality in the context of a single large disparity compared to a greater number of minor deviations. It is calculated through the formula $LSq = \sqrt{\left(\left(\Sigma(si - vi)^2\right)/2\right)}$, meaning the square root of the sum of the differences between percentage seat share (*si*) and percentage vote share (*vi*) divided by two (Gallagher and Mitchell 2005: 603). Broadly, the indices from this analysis range from 1, the most proportional, to 22, highly disproportionate, and it has been construed as a scale from the most consensual electoral systems to the most majoritarian (Lijphart 1999). As such, there is generally a negative association between disproportionality and fragmentation as electoral systems conducive to fewer effective parties (less fragmentation), such as single-member constituency systems, often observe a higher level of disparity in the translation of votes into seats, with the United States and India being the only two notable exceptions to this rule (Gallagher and Mitchell 2005).

We apply the ENP and Gallagher's LSq to the Australian federal party system in the period between 1951 and 2022. To simplify the terminology, we refer to Nv as the *number of parties by vote* and Ns as the *number of parties elected (e.g. seats in parliament)*, and Gallagher's LSq as the level of disproportionality.

Tracking the Federal Party System

When calculating the ENP for the Australian federal party system, we adhere to the existing methodological approaches (see Gallagher and Mitchell 2005; Siaroff 2003) and treat every party as a separate unit, including the Coalition parties—Liberal and National—on the grounds that they maintain legally distinct and formally autonomous party organisations. This allows for the greatest level of granularity in assessing the state of the party system, shifts in the relative strengths of each party, and the dynamics of party organisation in Australia. This decision does, however, have the effect of suggesting a greater level of party fragmentation than is likely present given that Liberals and Nationals operate in a fairly stable Coalition at the federal level. The data are then used to support a longitudinal

analysis of the degree of party fragmentation in both chambers of parliament over a 70-year span of time. This analysis is conducted alongside an analysis of disproportionality in each Australian election over the same period.

ENP is depicted in Figures 1.2 and 1.3. It reveals that the House and Senate party systems were largely stable two-party systems between 1951 and 1990. Between 1951 and 1987 only three parties (Labor, Liberal, and Country/National parties) gained more than 10 percent of the national primary vote in the House, while in the Senate there were only two occasions when non-major parties gained more than 10 percent. The number of parties elected to the House reached as high as 2.65 during this period, while in the Senate the figure rose above 3 on five occasions. To put the Australian situation into perspective, a perfect two-party system, such as the United States, had an average number of parties voted for of 2.12 and 1.98 parties elected in Congress between 2010 and 2020, while Germany's multiparty system had an average number of parties voted for of 5.25 and 4.49 parties elected between 2005 and 2017 (Gallagher 2023).

Levels of disproportionality in Australia proved more variable than the ENP between 1951 and 1987. As depicted in Figure 1.4, there were only a few periods—such as between 1955 and 1966—when the levels of disproportionality, while tending upwards, were relatively moderate. Moreover, levels of disproportionality were roughly similar in both the House and Senate until a clear divergence emerged beginning in 1974. While the level of disproportionality in the Senate began to decline, it continued to increase in the House. This, however, had little relationship to fragmentation and was primarily associated with the high disparities between vote and seat share observed by the major parties.

Beginning in the 1990s, the number of parties gaining a more substantial vote and seat share in parliament steadily increased (Marsh 1996). The appearance of the Greens at the 1990 federal election caused an initial splintering of the progressive left vote, primarily at Labor's expense (McAllister et al. 2012: 193). The Greens gained their first Senate seat while the Australian Democrats (now defunct) regularly attained the third highest share of seats in the Senate throughout the 1990s. As Figure 1.3 depicts, minor parties and independents won more than 10 percent of the national primary vote in the House in four out of 16 elections prior to 1990. Since then, however, the combined non-major party vote has been greater than 10 percent at every federal election, while the primary vote for Labor and the Coalition has steadily decreased over this period.

The observation that partisan dealignment has been underway since the 1990s (Kollman and Jackson 2021) is reflected in the ENP. The number of parties by votes in House elections averaged 3.26 between 1990 and 2001, compared to 2.78 between 1951 and 1987. The number of parties represented in the House averaged 2.46 over this period, indicating a fall from an average of 2.51 in the period up to 1987 and suggesting a less fragmented parliament than the broader electorate. Similarly, the number of Senate parties by votes rose from an average of 2.67 to 3.24, while there was a marginal shift from 2.76 to 3.08 in terms of seats over the same period.

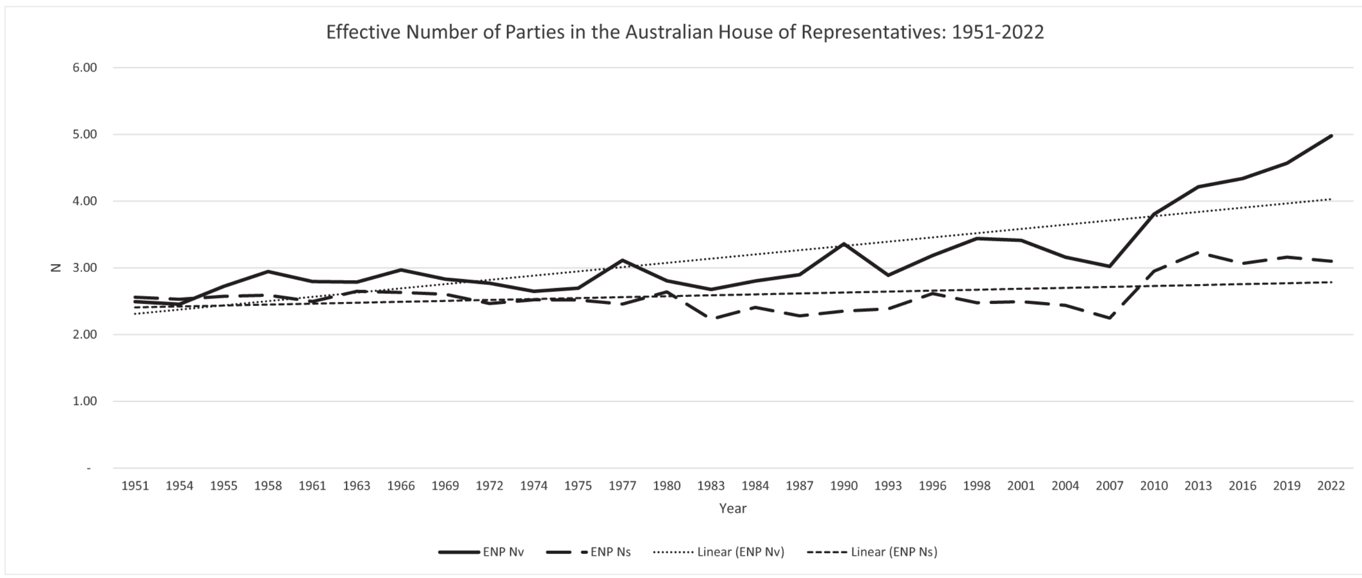

Figure 1.2 Effective Number of Parties in the Australian House of Representatives, 1951–2022.

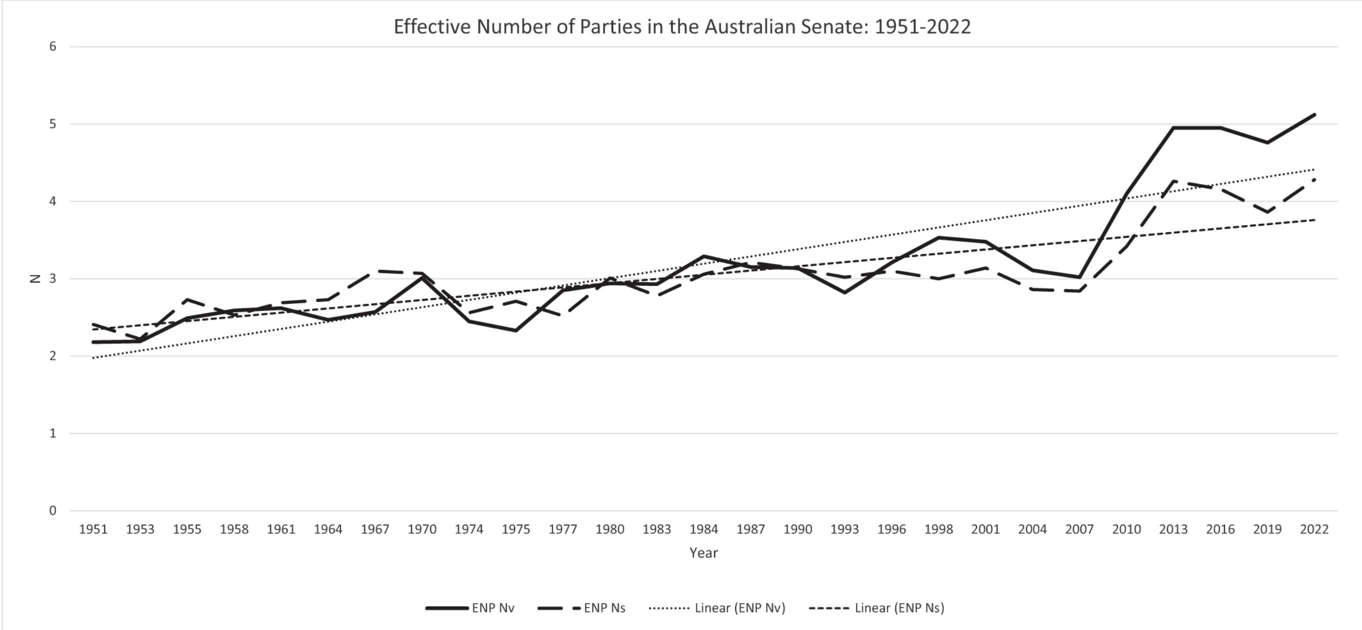

Figure 1.3 Effective Number of Parties in the Australian Senate, 1951–2022.

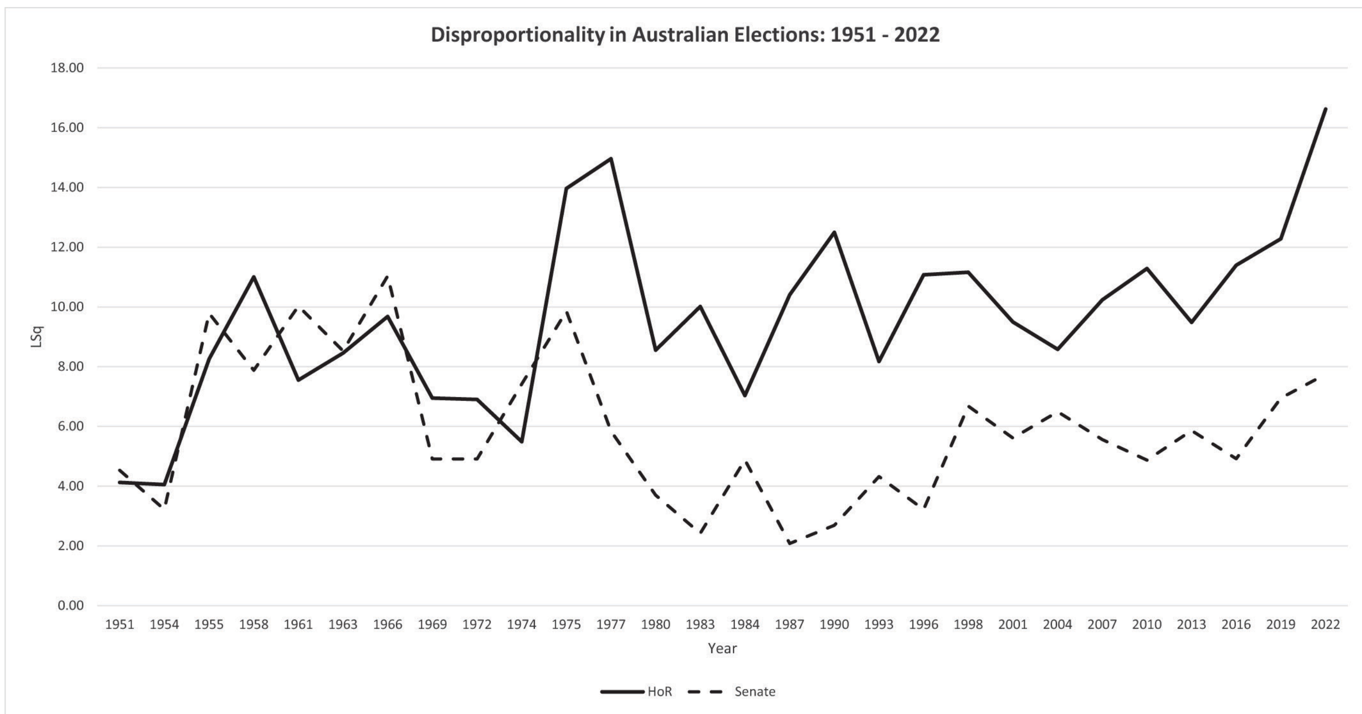

Figure 1.4 Disproportionality in Australian Elections, 1951–2022.