

Gender, Age and Generational Effects on Turnout in Australian Federal Elections¹

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Abstract

Turnout in Australian federal elections is consistently high by international standards, largely due to the effects of longstanding compulsory voting. However Australian turnout has seen a slight decline over recent elections, and understanding the factors that affect turnout are important for an electoral management body (EMB) tasked with delivering the franchise. Through an analysis of administrative data from the Australian Electoral Commission, this paper examines the effects of age and gender on turnout. We find that turnout in Australian federal elections is dependent on age, with younger people less likely to vote. However, in contrast to international findings, there does not appear to be a generational effect in non-voting in Australia – different generations are roughly equally likely to not vote when younger, and resume voting as they leave their 20s. We also find a small, though consistent, gender effect, with women being more likely to vote than men. Implications and suggestions for further research are made.

Introduction

By international standards, turnout in Australian federal elections is consistently high. While there are a number of factors which affect turnout that have been examined in the international literature, Australia's high election turnout is almost entirely driven by a long history of enforced compulsory voting and the attitudes towards voting that compulsory voting has encouraged.

The combination of compulsory voting and a central electoral management body responsible for federal elections across the country, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), creates in Australia a unique case study for examining turnout. The purpose of the current paper is to look at turnout trends over time, and the drivers of those trends,

¹ The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect an official view of the Australian Electoral Commission or the Australian Government.

through AEC administrative data. These data allow an analysis of individual voter turnout behaviour over time, allowing a detailed demographic analysis of turnout patterns. The current paper will focus specifically on gender and age effects in Australian turnout over time.

The paper will define what is meant by turnout in this context, comparing the different approaches to measuring turnout internationally, followed by a brief history of turnout patterns in Australia. The paper will then examine age and gender effects on turnout, with a particular focus on the relative contributions of age and generational effects on turnout. It will conclude with a discussion of some of the implications of turnout effects.

Why Turnout?

Turnout is a vital measure of democratic health, as an enrolment without a vote cast is the franchise only partially delivered. We would seek to measure turnout if only for the purpose of establishing the effectiveness of the delivery of the voting franchise. There are, however, a number of other uses for turnout.

High turnout can provide credibility to an election result. One of the central principles of democracy is that representatives are elected by the will of the people. On that measure, a high turnout is one of the factors that can give credibility to an election result. Other factors that lend credibility to an election include eligibility criteria, enrolment systems, voting systems and levels of corruption. In Australia the results of elections are generally well-accepted, and high turnout undoubtedly plays a part in this.

In many countries turnout can be used as a proxy for political engagement. This can be used for various purposes such as campaign targeting and determining which groups are underrepresented. In countries with compulsory voting, such as Australia, turnout is less useful for this purpose.

Finally, as discussed above, turnout, in conjunction with other indicators, is useful for measuring the delivery of the voting franchise to the population. This in turn provides a measure of how engaged the population is with the electoral system, as opposed to the political system. As with the other uses of turnout, other factors need to be taken into account.

The AEC uses turnout for measuring franchise delivery, in conjunction with two other Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that cover the practical delivery of the election. Arguably, for the franchise to be delivered to an elector they have to be enrolled (enrolment rate²),

² Other AEC publications have referred to this as a participation rate. However the less ambiguous term enrolment rate is used here.

cast a ballot paper (turnout rate), and the ballot paper has to be marked in accordance with the rules of formality (formality rate). When looking at the overall delivery of the franchise, Australian turnout is properly understood in the context of the other two KPIs.

The need to study turnout in Australia

Australia's federal, state and territory elections enjoy consistent and high turnouts when compared internationally. This presents two questions when studying turnout in Australia:

- What are the practical benefits of studying Australian turnout?
- With such consistent data, *how* do you study Australian turnout?

For electoral management bodies (EMBs) the practical reasons to study turnout are primarily around service delivery. While turnout in Australia is high, the electoral commissions are charged by their legislation to pursue full enrolment and voting. Turnout research can improve practical understandings and provide recommendations assist electoral commissions achieve their mandate.

Australian turnout is worth studying from an international perspective because of the impact of compulsory voting which is an unusual, although by no means unique, feature of Australian electoral systems. Australia's federal and state/territory versions of compulsion are often understood as being strictly enforced when compared to other systems (Electoral Commission, 2006).

Due to the consistency of turnout in Australia it can be difficult to identify trends and causes. This is because changes in turnout over time are so small that it is difficult to determine what portion of that change is attributable to any single factor.

Compulsory Voting

While this paper is not about compulsory voting, no discussion of Australian turnout is complete without some discussion of this unusual feature of Australian electoral systems. Compulsory voting is undoubtedly a factor in high Australian turnouts. As one academic has commented, "not only has compulsory voting kept turnout high in Australia, it has also rendered the *study* of turnout in Australian elections virtually irrelevant" (Jackman 1999).

In Australia electoral registration, which we refer to as enrolment, is compulsory. Voting is also compulsory, and while there is the threat of a fine for not voting, there is generally fairly positive public opinion in favour of compulsory voting in Australia, according to research such as the Australian Election Study (McAllister & Cameron, 2014).

Since the introduction of compulsory voting in Australia turnout has been high by international standards. Essentially, compulsory voting is the main driver of our high

turnout rate, a contention which seems to be uncontested in the international literature (see, for example, Fowler, 2013). All other factors, while they may have some input, probably only between them account for a percentage point or so difference in turnout election to election.

Theoretical Frameworks

Political scientists have attempted to study turnout by considering the contributions of sociodemographic, political and institutional factors. Geys (2006), for example, published a meta-analysis of 83 turnout studies which covered variables including population size, marginality of results, and the effects of electoral systems. He notes that while there is little agreement as to what variables best explain turnout, there do appear to be some theoretically relevant variables that are consistently seen to be related to turnout, however there has been little progress towards one theoretical framework which synthesises all of these results. Smets/van Ham (2013) undertook a meta-analysis of 90 papers covering 170 independent variables, which they referred to as “an embarrassment of riches”. Interestingly they made a point to list which variables were consistently found to have an impact on turnout, such as age, and those which were consistently found to have no impact on turnout, such as gender.

For the purposes of the current paper, a number of theoretical frameworks appear relevant. These include rational choice theory, and social theories such as social capital and conditional decision making.

Rational choice theory

There are a number of models for rational choice theory and voting. The general intention is to model the decision-making process of individuals. One of the earliest equations specifically designed to model turnout was proposed by Downs (1957), and further developed by Riker & Ordeshook (1968). Riker and Ordeshook’s model is:

$$R = pB - C + D$$

The terms of the equation can be defined as:

- R* the reward gained from voting (the chance that someone will vote, based on the other terms)
- p* probability of vote mattering (often thought of as the vote being decisive to the result)
- B* benefit to voter of having a particular candidate elected over other candidates

C costs of voting (time and effort spent)

D satisfaction derived from various things such as civic duty, party allegiance etc (this term, while discussed by Downs, was expanded and included in the model by Riker and Ordeshoot)

A simpler way of thinking about rational choice theory is as an access/motivation or cost/benefit analysis. The basic question of rational choice theory is whether the motivation for voting outweighs the barriers or costs to doing so.

Rational choice is intuitively appealing, however there are limits to its practical application from the perspective of an electoral management body.

Rational choice theory is highly dependent, as are all models, on the assumptions that go into it. Data that are used in the equation are usually drawn from one or more surveys. By necessity the survey data are also a proxy for the terms of the rational choice equation, as the specific terms are difficult to directly address in a survey (e.g. “what numeric value would you give to the benefit of the candidate you would likely vote for, compared to the ones that you would not vote for?”). Generally, there are challenges operationalising the variables of the equation, particularly from the perspective of practical strategies for increasing turnout, rather than attempting to describe why it is at the observed level.

Dowding (2005) argues that the rational choice formula does not explain *why* people vote, but the variables do capture some of the considerations in the decision to vote. Dowding suggests that civic duty motivates some people to vote, and that costs and benefits come into play most on those with low levels of civic duty.

It is also worth noting that in a compulsory voting environment non-voting carries a potential cost for a voter, meaning that the standard equation may not be sufficiently nuanced to explain or predict turnout.

These and other limits aside, rational choice is still a useful framework for thinking about the decision making process for electors.

Social theories

Social theories of turnout focus on the social context of electors, rather than individual motivations. In doing so these theories argue that the decision-making process about whether or not to vote is not as narrowly “rational” as rational choice theories tend to indicate.

This paper will look at two related social theories, social capital and conditional decision making. Social capital is about the structure of social influence, and conditional decision making is, in part, about how these structures influence behaviour.

Social capital

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has defined social capital as “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups” (Keeley, 2007). Social capital can generate benefits by “promoting co-operative and/or socially-minded behaviour in situations where narrow self-interest alone does not generate good outcomes for society” (Productivity Commission 2003).

At the most basic level, if a person’s socially-derived norms and values support the idea of voting as a societal good, and support the idea that societal goods are desirable, that person is more likely to vote. Social capital is not inherently pro-voting however. A social group may have strong views that voting is an unacceptable practice, or a waste of time. In these cases the social capital of the group reduces the chances of voting.

Social capital may come from family, from formal or informal groups, or from a nodding acquaintance (Putnam 2001). Social capital is not limited to a person’s immediate social group. A public figure that a person identifies with may have sufficient social capital to influence decisions.

In terms of election management bodies, social capital can be leveraged to encourage people to engage in the voting process through direct or indirect means. Direct means involve using the social capital of the election management body. This is generally derived from the EMB’s authority, although sometimes through law. An example in the Australian context would be sending letters to remind people that they are obliged by law to enrol and vote.

An indirect use of social capital utilises the social capital of others, such as having celebrities and community groups promote voting.

Conditional decision-making

Conditional decision-making, in this context, is behaviour that is driven by two things:

- The perceived social meaning of a situation
- The observed or expected behaviours of other people.

Behaving in accordance with these things is a form of conditional co-operation; a willingness to co-operate as long as other co-operate, to do what other people are doing.

A critical element to understanding conditional decision-making and conditional co-operation is that people are frequently unaware that their decision making process is being influenced. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that people’s perception of the influence of others on their behaviour is often inaccurate or completely wrong (Cialdini, 2005; Rolfe, 2012).

Under this type of theory the decision to turnout is a conditionally cooperative (but not necessarily conscious) response to decisions made by members of an elector’s social network. In other words you are more likely to vote if the people you know and/or see are voting.

Method

Defining Turnout

Turnout is commonly understood as a measure of the number or proportion of people who turn up to vote. While this definition may suffice for general conversation, it is too imprecise to allow for discussion of electoral administration, or comparison between jurisdictions.

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) (2012) defines turnout as: *The total number of votes cast (valid or invalid) divided by the number of names on the voters’ register, expressed as a percentage; i.e.*

$$\frac{\text{Votes cast (valid and invalid)}}{\text{Registered voters}} \times 100$$

The AEC’s definition of turnout is broadly consistent with this definition, although there are some terminology differences. The AEC’s definition is better expressed as: *the number of ballot papers entering scrutiny divided by the final enrolment figure, expressed as a percentage; i.e.*

$$\frac{\text{Ballot papers entering scrutiny}}{\text{Final enrolment}} \times 100$$

In this formulation scrutiny is the count of ballot papers accepted into the count and final enrolments are those enrolments that are accepted as valid for the election.

The terms *voter turnout* and *voter participation* are often confused, or used interchangeably. From the AEC’s perspective however, turnout is a defined mathematical measure, while participation is a more nebulous concept that may refer to any number of activities. This paper will not refer to “participation” so as to avoid ambiguity.

Uncontested elections are elections where either one or no candidates stand, meaning that no vote takes place. Although unknown in recent federal elections, uncontested elections in one or more House of Representatives (HoR) electorates were reasonably common until the mid-1950s. Uncontested elections, if not accounted for, can distort turnout figures. An uncontested election has enrolments (denominator), but no ballot papers (numerator). In the uncontested election someone is elected with “0%” turnout, which is clearly anomalous and arguably of no value as a statistic.

Uncontested elections also affect the national turnout figure as they contribute no votes to the scrutiny. For example, in 1955, there were uncontested elections for 11 out of 124 HOR electorates meaning 8% of those enrolled would not be required to complete a HOR ballot paper. Calculating turnout using national enrolment would give an apparent turnout of 87.40%. This figure is of little value for comparison purposes across years.

Taking this into account, the AEC removes enrolments for uncontested divisions when calculating national turnout. Using this method for the 1955 election results in a national turnout of 95.00%.

Enrolled Population and Voting Age Population

Another complicating factor for the purposes of international comparisons is the way in which we measure turnout. Much of the published international data on turnout from organisations such as International IDEA measure turnout in terms of how many people voted compared to the population that is of voting age (18 years or older in Australia), which we refer to as a measure of VAP – Voting Age Population.

VAP is available from census counts and similar activities. In some countries, including Australia, VAP is a poor indicator of the proportion of the population who can vote. VAP does not take account of those people in the population who are *not* eligible to vote for any reason other than age, such as non-citizenship.

If Australian turnout was defined using VAP instead of registered population, a sharper decline over the past two decades would be evident, as seen in Figure 1. Rather than showing a broader decline in voter engagement, this highlights some of the difficulties when using VAP to determine turnout.

The disparity in the trend is due to a number of factors. Probably the most important is the increasing number of people in Australia who are not eligible to enrol due to the citizenship requirement.

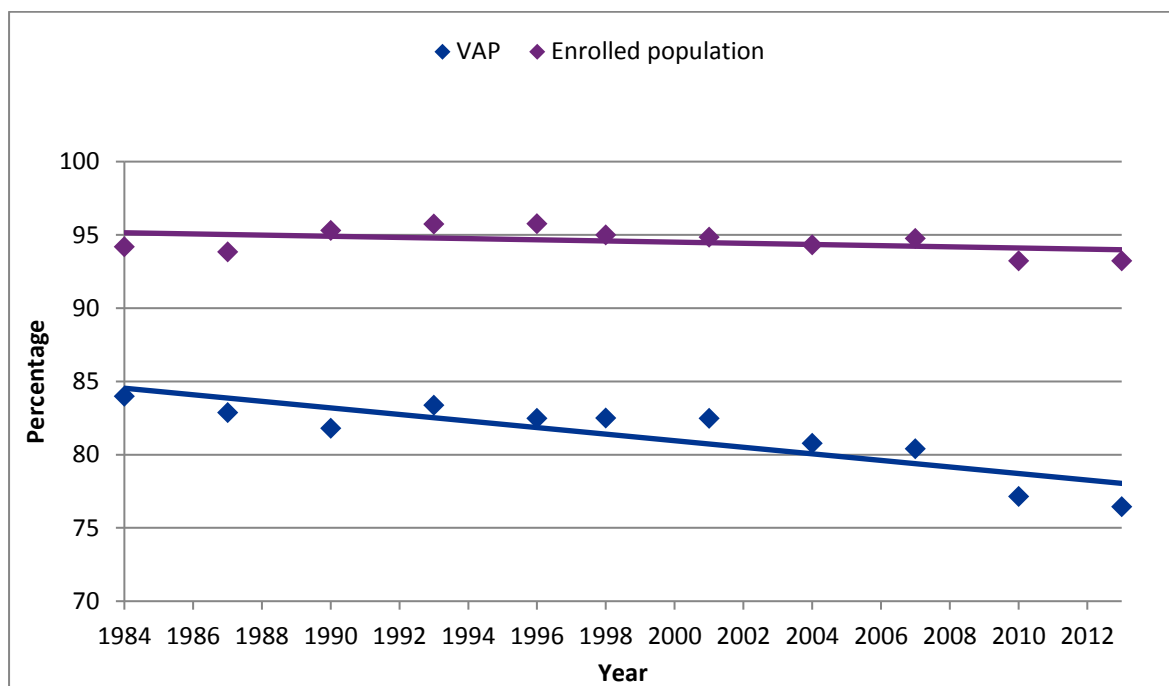


Figure 1: Turnout and VAP Turnout, 1984 - 2013

“Mark-off” and Calculating Turnout

The analysis below uses Australian Electoral Commission administrative data. Much of the analysis is drawn from a compilation of “mark-off” data – the record of which electors are marked off the certified list for each election. Through matching the unique codes of deidentified electors across electoral events, along with their age, we were able to create a time-series of electoral turnout behaviour at seven federal elections and a referendum from 1996 to 2013.

Due to the occurrence of administrative errors in the mark-off data, it is not an exact measure of turnout, however due to the size of the data set and the low rate of errors, any differences are very minor. It is, however, substantially more accurate than relying on recall of turnout of a sample of electors, and is not subject to either sampling error or social desirability effects.

Australian turnout over time

Since mid-last century there has been a general decline in turnout in established democracies (see, for example, Blais & Rubenson, 2013). While this general decline has been somewhat overstated (in part due to a reliance on VAP based turnout), there is a sufficient body of evidence to say that turnout among industrialised, voluntary voting democracies has declined from the early to mid-1900s to the present day, and from the 1960s in particular (McDonald & Popkin, 2001). Australia’s turnout seems to be resistant

to this trend, although there has been a slight decline since the 1990s. It is likely that one of the primary reasons that Australia’s turnout has remained relatively constant is compulsory voting.

Australia’s turnout has been consistently high since the implementation of compulsory voting in 1925 (see Figure 2). Prior to compulsory voting, Australian turnout was reasonably volatile, ranging from 50.3% in 1903 to 78.3% in 1917. New Zealand turnout was used as a discussion point in parliament in regards to Australian turnout. New Zealand turnout, during the same period, was consistently higher and more stable, ranging from 76.7% in 1902 to 90.9% in 1925. After the introduction of compulsory voting, Australian turnout jumped to over 90%, and has remained remarkably consistent since that time.

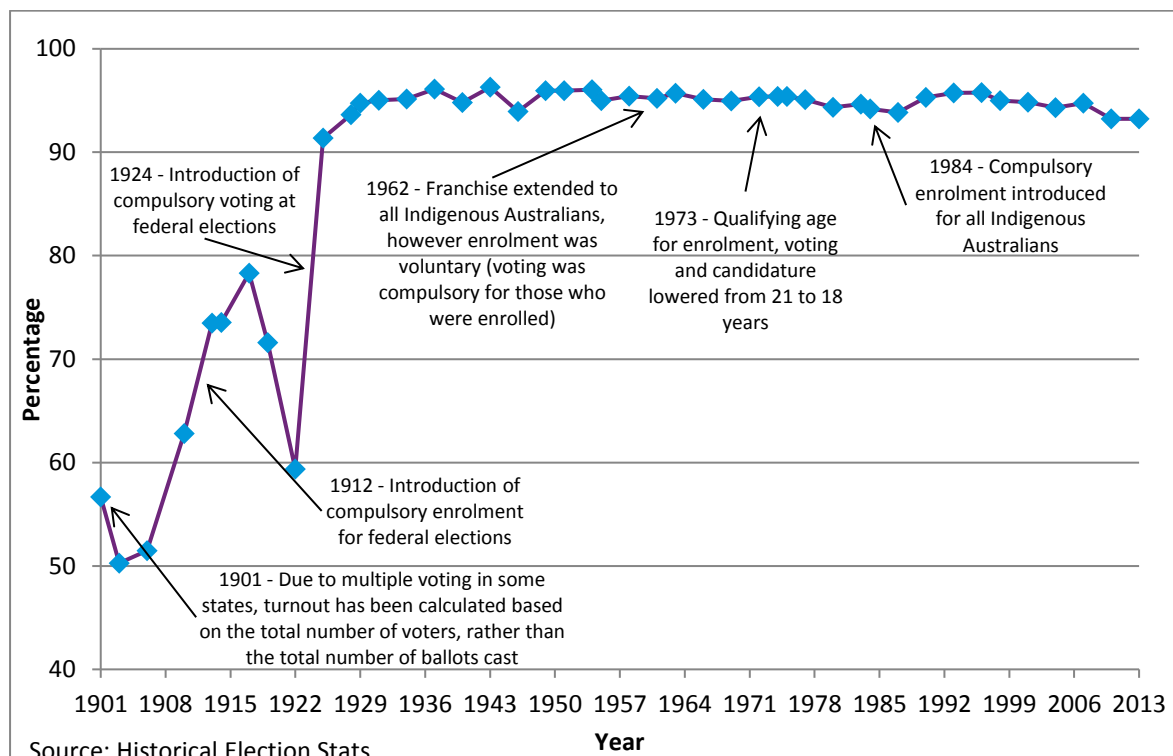


Figure 2: Turnout for House of Representatives general elections, 1901 - 2013

The lowest Australian federal turnout since the introduction of compulsory voting was 91.38% in 1925, while the highest was 96.3% in 1943. For the period between 1925 and 2013 there is a slight downward trend in turnout (see Figure 3), although it is so slight that it barely warrants the term “decline”.

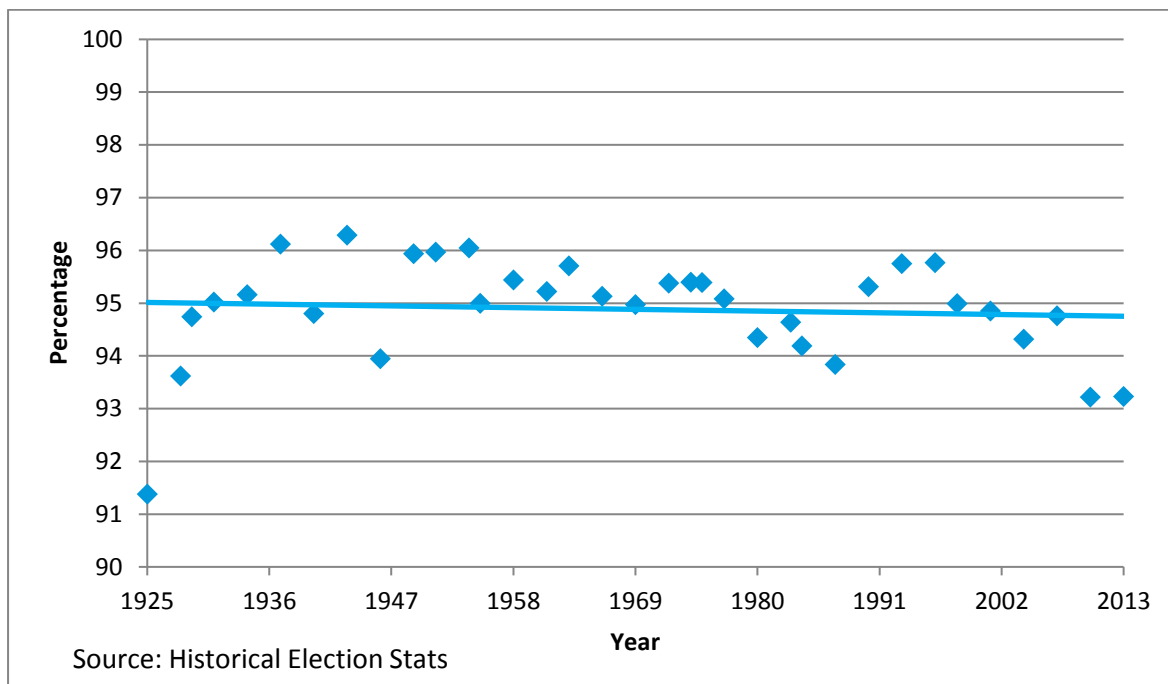


Figure 3: Australian House of Representatives turnout since the introduction of compulsory voting

The 1925 turnout rate is an outlier from all subsequent turnout rates. If 1925 is excluded the lowest turnout was 93.22% in 2010 (3.1% lower than the 1943 peak, and 0.01% lower than the 2013 turnout).

The consistency of turnout figures makes it difficult to draw a conclusion about a long-term historical trend. However from 1984, when the current electoral system was more or less in place, the trend is more distinct. There is a clear, though gradual, decline in turnout from the 1990s to 2013 (see Figure 4).

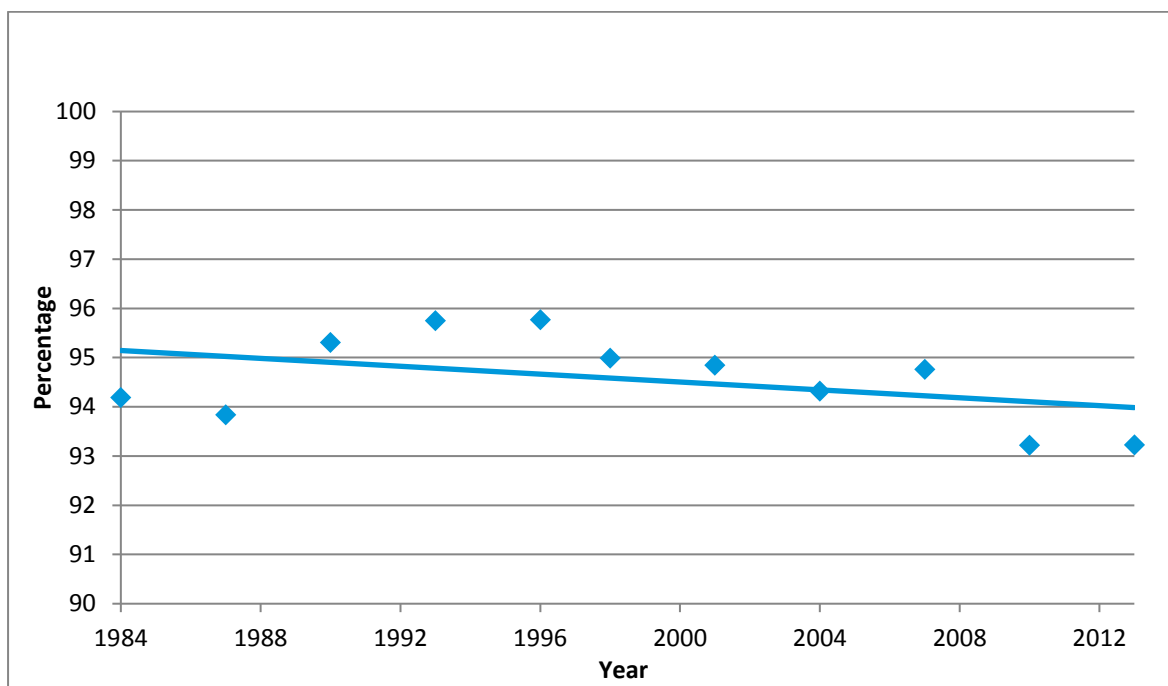


Figure 4: House of Representatives Turnout, 1984 - 2013

While Australian turnout remains high by international standards, the downward trend is undesirable from a franchise delivery or democratic health viewpoint. With the 2010 election setting an 85 year record low for national turnout, and 2013 only marginally higher, it is possible that Australia is reaching a new plateau at around 93% turnout. The 2016 and 2019 elections will tell us whether this is the case.

Age and generational effects

Age appears to have a strong relationship with turnout. Notably, 18 and 19 year olds tend to have high turnout rates, although it should be noted that enrolment rates for these age groups are low, followed by a decline though the 20s with lower turnout rates persisting up to the mid-to-late-30s. Turnout appears to be relatively consistent from the mid-40s up to the age of 70³.

Figure 5 shows the number of electors recorded as casting a vote in the 2007, 2010 and 2013 elections, disaggregated by age group.⁴

³ Note that in Victorian local government elections, voting is not compulsory for electors over the age of 70. This may affect the number of over 70s voting in Victoria.

⁴ Roll mark-off used as a close proxy for turnout.

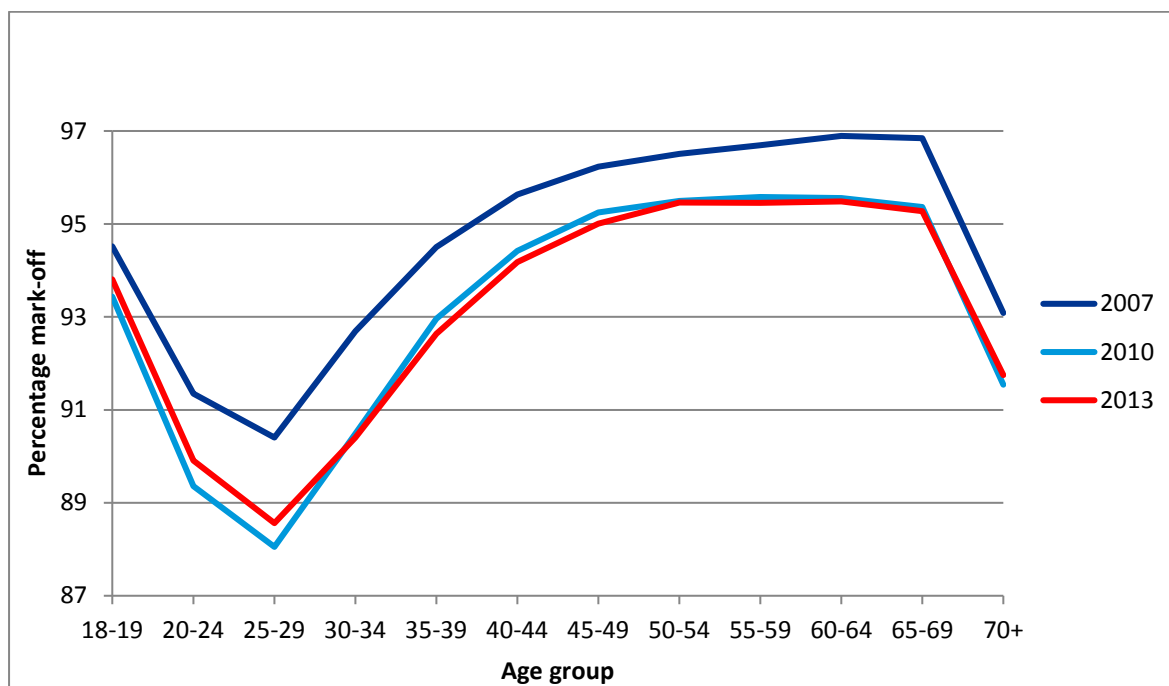


Figure 5: Mark-off by age cohort, 2007 - 2013

A number of elements may explain this pattern, including geographic mobility (more common in people in their 20s than in other age groups), life cycle activities (children, housing, marriage etc) and differing patterns of engagement. Hoffman & Lazaridis (2013) argue that the presence of families has a significant influence on the development of a cohesive community as children facilitate population interaction and establishment of social networks. This would equate to increasing size and decreasing density of networks which correlate with increased turnout (Rolfe 2012). While this may be true, if we accept that families and social connections could improve the likelihood of voting by way of example or opinions, they could also reduce the likelihood of voting if their example or opinions were contrary to voting.

The age pattern is remarkably consistent, and may contribute to a belief that voting is in decline due to the disengagement of contemporary young people. However our analysis indicates that this is not the case, and that the age trends of turnout are remarkably consistent over time.

An examination of the enrolment rate and the turnout rate by age gives us a very solid and noticeable trend. Namely, the delivery of the voting franchise is more successful with older ages than younger ones.

The charts raise the question of why 18-19 year olds turnout in such high numbers. The reason is that 18-19 year olds are less likely to be enrolled than other people. Given that

the young people who enrol are more likely to be interested (or more likely to respond to family or peer encouragement to engage with the electoral system), they are more likely to vote than people whose enrolment is potentially from years ago. Hence 18-19 year olds have higher turnout rates. When we factor in approximate enrolment rates (by using an estimate of Voting Eligible Population instead of enrolled population), 18 and 19 year olds have much lower “voting rates”.

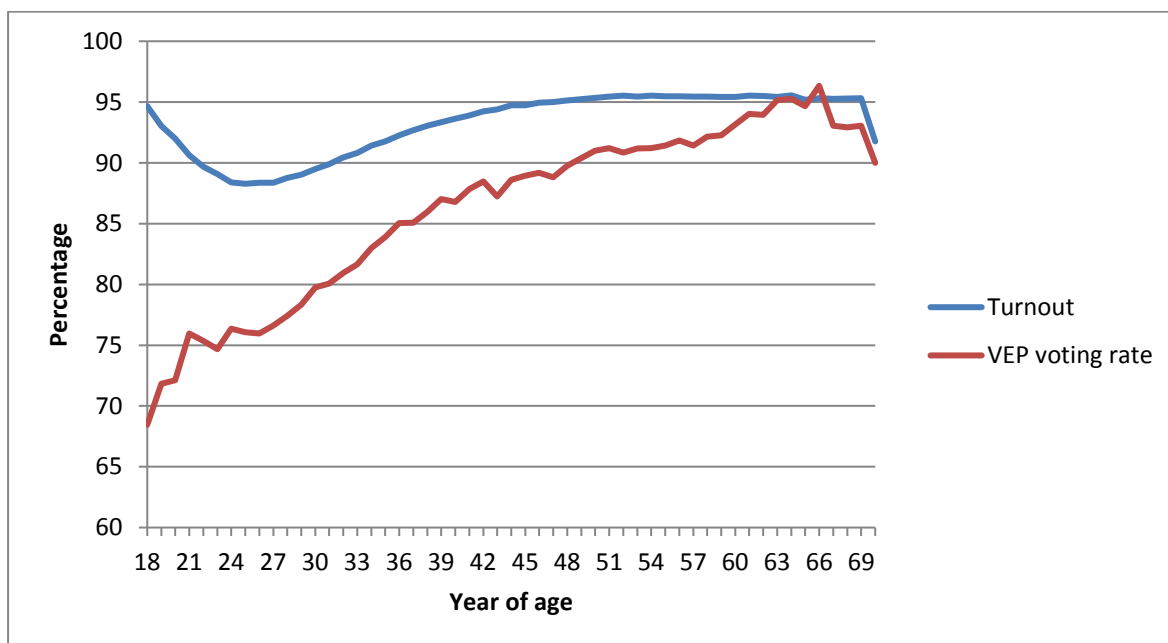


Figure 6: Age turnout and VEP voting rate, 2013

Much of the international work on age and turnout argues that the decline in turnout in democracies around the world amongst young people is not simply an age issue, but is a generational issue. That is, while people are less likely to vote when they’re young, recently generations are less likely to vote across their entire life (Blais, Gidengil, Nevitte & Nadeau, 2004). While these findings have been reasonably well replicated, the root cause of the decline is not clear (Blais/Rubenson, 2013). Given that the turnout decline in Australia has been smaller than in comparable democracies that do not have compulsory voting, it is of interest to see whether this generational effect is also in operation in Australia.

In Australia any generational turnout effect would be difficult to detect, given the historically consistent turnout levels. In order for turnout to remain so consistent for so long, any tendency for younger generations to not vote would need to be counterbalanced by growing turnout in older generations.

In order to test the possibility of a generational effect, we analysed apparent non-voter data by age going back to the 1996 election⁵. While this is not a generation's worth of data, it does provide a longitudinal look at turnout by birth cohort. Age groups were compared across eight events spanning 17 years (including the 1999 referendum).

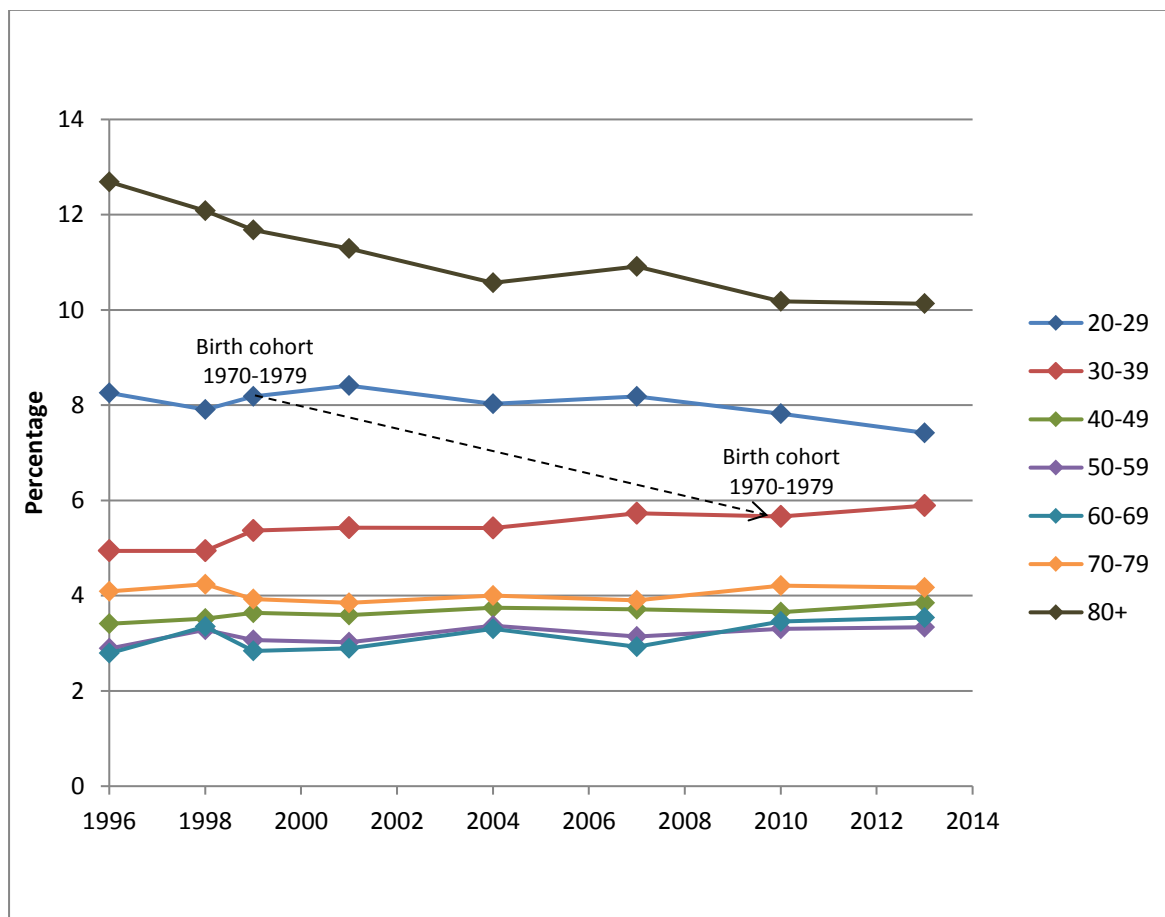


Figure 7: Non-voting rate by age, adjusted to equaivalise overall event-specific rates (Source: AEC Data)

As can be seen from Figure 7, if a generational effect were occurring the lines would slope as generations moved into and out-of an age group. Instead we found that the turnout for voters in a particular age range was remarkably consistent over time, with the exception of voters aged 80 and above.

We then took cohorts of birth years and plotted their non-voter rates for each event against age at the time of the event (see Figure 8). Each birth cohort is represented by a line of eight dots (one for age at the time of each event).

⁵ Non-voter rates were adjusted so that overall event specific rates were equalised. Birth cohorts were analysed in 10-year age groups.

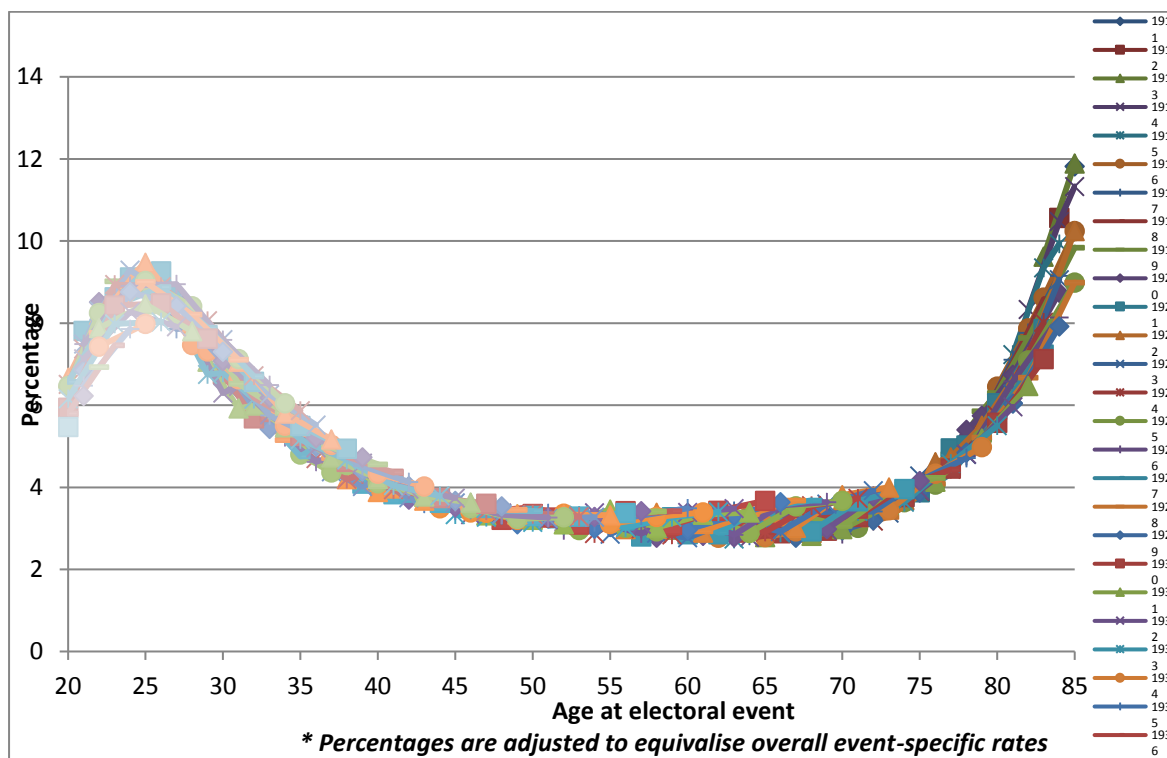


Figure 8: Non-voting rate* by year of birth (cohort) and age at electoral event

Again, age appears to be the driving factor on turnout, rather than birth cohort. That is, each cohort’s behaviour at HoR elections 1996-2013 conformed to the particular age they were at the time. This is most easily seen in the sloping areas of the chart, where we can see birth cohorts changing turnout in a direction consistent with the overall age curve.

Looking at these data, the only slight exception to the overall pattern was that for the 2010 and 2013 elections, electors in their 60s had a higher level of non-voting than might have been expected based on voting behaviour from previous electors in their 60s.

There was also a slight decrease in non-turnout among under 30s for the 2013 election, that was offset by a decline in turnout among the over 30s. The degree of change, however, is too narrow to draw any conclusions from.

Based on these findings, regardless of when electors were born, age specific non-voter rates for all but the oldest age groups were roughly within a one percentage-point range. This is in contrast to the spread across all ages of seven percentage-points.

Gender effect in turnout

Gender does not appear to have a strong effect on turnout. However we have mark-off data indicating that since 1996, turnout for males has been consistently lower than for

females (see Figure 9). Further, the degree to which male turnout is lower has been gradually increasing, with the gap widening from 0.3% in 1996 to 0.7% in 2013⁶.

In 2013 it appears that gender based turnout moved in different directions for the first time since at least 1996, with female turnout rising fractionally, while male turnout dropped. However given that the turnout rates in 2010 and 2013 were almost identical, any variation would have resulted in a similar pattern. Given this, and the relatively small change between 2010 and 2013, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the apparent “change” of direction.

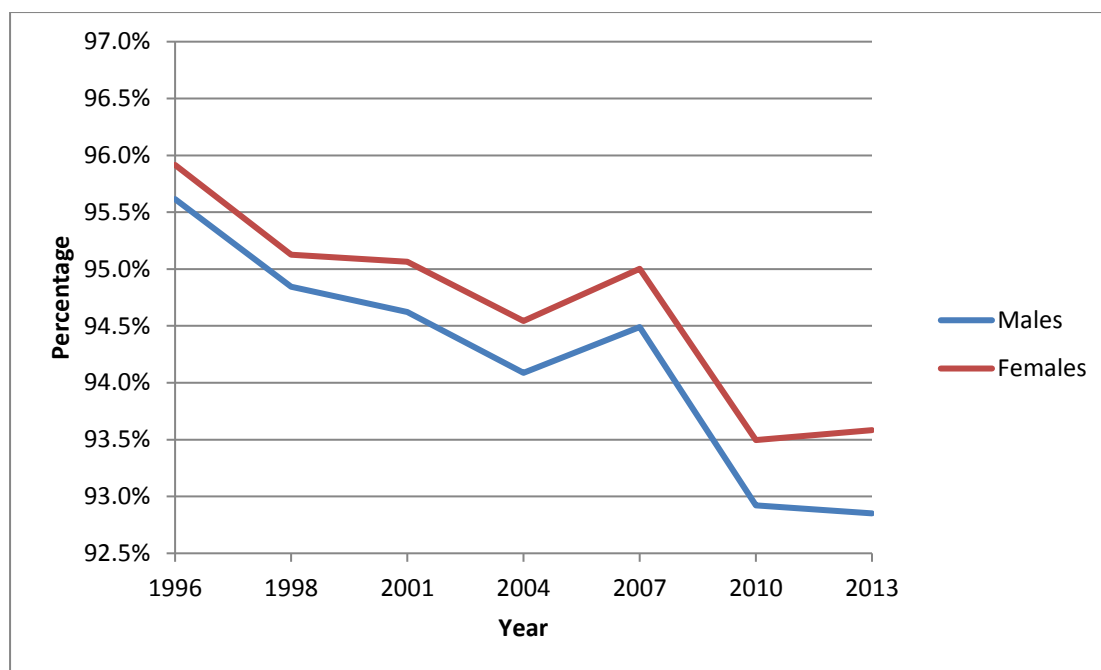


Figure 9: Gender and turnout in House of Representatives Elections

While the difference in gender turnout is not having a strong impact on turnout overall, it will be monitored over time. While the gap between gender turnout is relatively small in most states and territories (hovering around 1%), in the NT the difference is around 3%, which also needs to be monitored.

Implications

Age is not the only variable that affects turnout in Australian federal elections. If it were, Australia’s aging population would result in higher turnouts, rather than the mild decline of recent elections. Clearly there are other factors that affect turnout and, given the

⁶ Note that these numbers are generated through the use of mark off, and are therefore a proxy for actual turnout. However the trend should be reliable.

consistency of the overall age/turnout pattern, these factors appear to affect the population generally.

Nonetheless age is a pivotal component of understanding turnout, and the age structure suggests that targeting turnout at people under the age of 40 is a valid strategy for increasing overall turnout. The consistency of the results over time, particularly the turnout dip amongst young enrolled voters do, however, lead to the question as to resistance of this pattern to change. The results indicate that over the past two decades none of the AEC's initiatives have had a substantial or prolonged impact on youth turnout. This is not to suggest that the pattern is impossible to change, but that perhaps any strategy to increase youth turnout needs to be particularly well targeted.

The gender differences in Australian turnout are small, though also remarkably consistent. Given the size difference, it is perhaps not economical to implement any gender-targeted turnout campaigns. However it does suggest that the factors leading to the differences in turnout between males and females might be worth examining in more detail in future research.

Conclusions

It is premature to say whether the recent slight decline in turnout in Australian federal elections is of cause for concern. As much as it is reflective of a wider international decline in turnout in national elections, the decline appears to be significantly arrested by a long history of compulsory voting in Australia and the positive culture towards voting that legal compulsion has fostered (see, for example, McAllister, 2011).

The lower turnout amongst younger Australians is by now a well-established trend, however even when considering the lower levels of enrolment for young voters, VEP turnout is still relatively high by international standards. Survey research indicates that the attitudes of young people in Australia towards democracy are more negative than older generations, but not significantly so (McAllister, 2014).

The finding that the age turnout effect in Australia is an age effect and not a generational one is in striking contrast to international research. Blais and Rubenson (2013) examined a total of 86 election studies over eight countries conducted since the 1950s and found that "post-boomers" were 22 per cent less likely to vote than "baby-boomers", all else being equal. This generational effect is not present in our Australian data.

It is important to note that most research on this topic uses samples and self-reported attendance, whereas our data is the actual recorded attendance of between 11 and 14 million voters enrolled for eight elections, which may be one source of the difference in

results. The timeframe over which the behaviour is considered is also considerably shorter than some international research, however we would expect to have seen at least some generation effect over 20 years of elector behaviour. It seems more likely, however, that the strong voting culture created by the long use of compulsory voting results in fundamentally different voter behaviour over time in Australia than in other comparable democracies. This is obviously a finding which requires considerable further research.

Even in the absence of a detectable generational effect, the very consistent and noticeable failure to vote amongst young enrolled voters, peaking at 25 years of age, remains to be explained. The current analysis does not allow us to reach any conclusions as to the cause of youth electoral disengagement, and most importantly, later re-engagement, however we suggest lifecycle explanations may play a role. One particularly useful piece of further research, from the perspective of an electoral management body, would be the extent to which this age effect is susceptible to change through education or electoral practice, or whether it is particularly resistant to change and not a cost-effective problem to target.

Smets and van Ham (2013) report that gender was included as a variables in over two thirds of the 90 empirical turnout studies they included in their meta-analysis, but that very few studies found a significant gender effect. When they did, it tended to be that women had higher turnout rates than men. Our research is consistent with this finding. The gender turnout effect in Australia is small (and non-significant), but remarkably consistent over the past few decades, with women consistently showing higher levels of turnout than men.

Finally, this research demonstrates some of the strengths of using administrative data to examine issues relevant to both electoral administrators and academic researchers. While appropriate caution must be used with data that were never intended for these sorts of analyses, in some cases they can provide insights not available elsewhere.

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