

## A CHANGING AUSTRALIA II: THE PUBLIC DISAPPROVES OF SENATE MAJORITY

In July 2005, a federal government won control of the Senate for the first time since 1981, after the Howard-led Coalition secured a higher than expected vote in the elections of October 2004. With this new majority in both parliamentary houses, the government can pass its legislative agenda without the need to consult with opposition parties – effectively eliminating what has become an important aspect of the Senate's role. AuSSA 2005 asks respondents about their knowledge of who controls the Senate, and about their attitudes toward who controls it. The first thing to say is that most voters (79 per cent) know that the Coalition parties have a majority in the upper house, with few (1 per cent) saying Labor. But almost one in five citizens did not know (19 per cent responded 'Can't choose'). Overall, voters who did not know had lower levels of formal education and lower incomes, which suggests that voters affected by Senate decisions (such as changes to welfare provisions) may be unaware of this new legislative power.

AuSSA 2005 finds that, overall, 57 per cent of voters disapprove of the Senate majority (they say it's 'a bad thing') with just 14 per cent saying it's 'a good thing' (see table 1.2). Quite a few say 'it's too early to say' but very few think 'it will make no difference' anyway (just 8 per cent). It's not surprising that Labor, Democrat and Green voters are strongly opposed to Howard's majority (all above 80 per cent). What is more surprising is the low number of Coalition voters willing to say the majority is a good thing – 29 per cent for Liberal and 28 per cent of National identifiers respectively. More conservative voters have adopted a 'wait and see' attitude, which may have some implications for strategic voters in the 2007 elections.

If we look at response patterns by demographic groups, we can see that women are slightly more likely than men to feel the Coalition's united control of parliament is a bad thing, as are those with university education. At the same time, older respondents, and those with higher incomes are less critical of the Coalition's control of both chambers. This likely reflects in part the fact that the Coalition has disproportionate support among men, those with high incomes and university education, and among the ranks of older Australians. But as we have seen, a minority of Coalition supporters agrees that Senate control is a good thing. Clearly, despite the likelihood of a partisan flavour to the patterns in attitudes found in this table,

**Table 1.2 Coalition's control of both the House and Senate since 2004, good or bad thing, per cent**

	Good thing	Bad thing	Makes no difference	Too early to say
<b>Party identification</b>				
Liberal (n=697)	29	22	12	34
Labor (n=610)	2	80	5	10
National (n=61)	28	25	12	34
Democrats (n=27)	0	82	4	15
Greens (n=110)	3	91	2	5
One Nation (n=29)	10	69	0	21
Family First (n=44)	9	48	14	25
No party ID (n=350)	5	65	5	17
<b>Ticket splitters</b>				
Split tickets (n=296)	5	71	4	19
Straight tickets (n=1469)	16	50	8	22
<b>Strength of party identification</b>				
Very strong supporter (n=189)	31	50	7	11
Fairly strong supporter (n=789)	14	53	8	23
Not very strong supporter (n=622)	11	52	8	24
<b>Confidence in federal parliament</b>				
Good deal of confidence (n=81)	44	19	9	26
Quite a bit of confidence (n=648)	22	33	9	32
Not very much confidence (n=848)	7	65	7	17
No confidence (n=297)	4	84	3	5
<b>Sex</b>				
Female (n=902)	11	57	7	22
Male (n=1037)	16	53	7	20
<b>Education</b>				
No university degree (n=1466)	14	53	8	22
University degree (n=462)	11	62	6	19
<b>Age</b>				
18–34 (n=385)	7	65	7	15
35–49 (n=557)	12	57	8	19
50–64 (n=566)	14	53	7	23
65 and over (n=429)	19	44	7	27
<b>Income</b>				
\$0 to \$31 199 (n=687)	12	55	7	21
\$31 200 to \$77 999 (n=843)	12	58	7	20
\$78 000 and over (n=223)	20	46	7	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>22</b>

SOURCE The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2005

NOTE Can't choose responses excluded from this table.

\* less than n=20 in the cell

Australians are deeply divided about government and its legislative powers.

Is the relatively hostile view to the government's Senate majority something unexpected, or can we find support for limits on the power of government from other sources over time? It is true that Australia's voters, by and large, have traditionally preferred governments to be in a position to pass legislation, perhaps agreeing with advocates of parliamentary stability, who have argued that 'obstruction' in the 'house of review' is damaging to democracy. These analysts point to the Senate's ability to reject supply as symptomatic of the chamber's unusually powerful institutional role (see Report of the Advisory Committee on Executive Government 1987, p. 22). Both major parties, not surprisingly, are on the record as expressing frustration with the Senate's historical ability to stymie legislation (Oakes 1999, p. 32).

However, over time, the Australian public has become accustomed to 'divided government'. With minor parties increasing their share of voter support, and ever-larger numbers of voters showing signs of political distrust, growing numbers of Australians support divided control of the House and Senate as a way to check major party power in parliament (Bowler & Denemark 1993; Bean & Wattenberg 1998), with some voters using their votes to signal this distrust. Perhaps the most prominent of these signals is the casting of split tickets – votes for different parties in the House and Senate – as a way to prevent either major party from having too much power (see Fiorina 1992). All told, given these different political sentiments, the 2004 election's awarding of control of both Australian parliamentary houses to the Coalition must be seen as a significant – even puzzling – event and deserves a close look.

Perhaps the best way to begin is to provide a quick historical perspective on attitudes towards divided control of Australia's House and Senate. Table 1.3 uses Australian Election Study data to examine the links between a variety of political sentiments and support for divided control of parliament across the last decade. Several patterns are evident. First, party loyalists are more likely to support divided control of parliament when their party is not in government. Liberal partisans, for example, were far more likely to support divided control in 1993, when Labor was in government, than in 1998, 2001 and 2004, when the Coalition held the reins of parliamentary power. Supporters of minor parties, not surprisingly, are the strongest supporters of

divided control. The perennial promise of small parties to control the balance of power in the Senate as a way to ‘keep the bastards honest’, as Democrats’ founder Don Chipp put it, has historically been essential to attracting votes. We can also see that the level of support for divided control among opposition party loyalists jumped in 2004. This would seem to suggest that the Coalition’s victory in both houses made additional numbers of respondents appreciate, if belatedly, the desirability of checks on parliamentary power.

**Table 1.3 Support for divided control of Australian parliamentary House and Senate, 1993–2004, per cent**

	1993	1998	2001	2004
<b>Party identifiers</b>				
Liberal	54	32	30	29
Labor	33	56	50	73
National	53	30	33	36*
Democrats	77	84	75	67*
Greens		61*	67	81
One Nation		64	52	64*
No party ID	54	51	51	62
<b>Ticket splitters</b>				
Split tickets	70	67	68	74
Straight tickets	41	42	39	48
<b>Strength of party identification</b>				
Very strong supporter	36	43	37	47
Fairly strong supporter	44	46	46	51
Not very strong supporter	50	49	40	50
<b>Difference between the two major parties</b>				
Good deal of difference	41	42	33	43
Some difference	47	47	45	54
Not much difference	52	54	52	60
No difference	37*	54	38	66
<b>Government looks after themselves/ trusted to do the right thing</b>				
Usually looks after themselves	47	52	50	62
Sometimes looks after themselves	46	45	39	49
Sometimes can be trusted to do right thing	47	47	43	55
Usually can be trusted to do right thing	33	35	31	31
Overall support for divided control	45	47	44	52

SOURCES Australian Election Study 1993, 1998, 2001, 2004

NOTE Percentages in table are the proportion of respondents who favoured divided control of the House and Senate.

\* less than n=20 in the cell

Table 1.3 reveals that even party loyalists are warming to divided control of parliament. In fact, between 1993 and 2004 ‘very strong supporters’ have become more likely to support divided control – nearly one half (47 per cent) of even ardent party loyalists now agree that divided parliamentary power is desirable. As we would expect, respondents who see little or no difference between the two major parties are more likely to support divided control than those who see big differences. And, as we would expect, ticket splitters across the last ten years consistently favour divided control more than those who cast straight tickets for one party. Ticket splitters are clearly using their votes to keep a check on government. Perhaps the sharpest difference in support for divided control is found between those who trust and don’t trust government. Respondents who feel those in government look mostly after themselves, and feel those in government can only sometimes be trusted to do the right thing, are more likely to support divided parliamentary control. Interestingly, this is a pattern that became all the more accentuated in 2004, after the Coalition’s double chamber victory.

## ABOUT AUSSA 2005

The research in this book draws primarily from the second AuSSA survey completed in late 2005 and early 2006. AuSSA is a product of the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research at the Australian National University in collaboration with researchers from other Australian and overseas universities. AuSSA is also the official Australian contribution to the world’s two major social survey consortiums: the International Social Survey Program, covering 41 countries and the World Values Survey, covering over 80 countries. AuSSA 2005 includes the ISSP’s 2004 Citizenship module and the 2005 Work Orientations III module. AuSSA also included the World Values 2005 module (the first World Values data for Australia since 1995, which will be available to researchers and the public). AuSSA 2007 will field the ISSP’s 2006 *Role of Government IV* module and the 2007 *Leisure Time & Sports* module (which is new to the ISSP program).

AuSSA takes the form of a mail questionnaire sent to more than 10 000 Australian citizens every two years. The survey itself was prepared by five Principal Investigators – Shaun Wilson, Rachel Gibson, Gabrielle Meagher, David Denemark and Mark Western – in co-operation with the AuSSA Advisory Panel, which met to draft the survey at the University of Queensland Social Research Cen-