11. The Greens

Andrew Bartlett

The 2010 federal election was undoubtedly a watershed for the Australian Greens as a political party at the national level. It produced a record high vote for third parties in a federal election in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, as well as a major breakthrough in winning a House of Representatives seat for the first time at a general election.

Historical Comparison

The Greens’ 2010 vote was larger than any previous third party in modern Australian political history.

It was the first time a third party had a senator elected in every State.

Figure 11.1 House of Representatives: Historical highs
Figure 11.2 Senate: Historical highs

The election campaign and result can be assessed on both the Greens’ policies and their positioning as a party competing against Labor and the Coalition in their own right, as well as in comparison with other third parties in Australian politics in the past.

Unlike other third parties of note since World War II, the Greens’ vote in federal elections has built up gradually and consistently over a relatively long period. In contrast, both the Australian Democrats and the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) gained large votes early in their existence, and experienced notable peaks and troughs going forward. (The only other third parties to have gained a sizeable primary vote, the Nuclear Disarmament Party and One Nation, were even more rapid in their rise and fall.)
Growth of the Greens’ Vote

Figure 11.3 The Greens’ Vote has Grown Substantially Over the Past 14 Years

Table 11.1 Growth of Greens’ Vote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>House</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both the DLP and the Democrats had balance-of-power leverage from a relatively early stage, and both were relatively weakly represented in parliaments, assemblies and councils at State, Territory and local government levels. In contrast, much like the party’s own organisational structure, the Greens have built up slowly but steadily over more than 20 years, gradually increasing their presence at these levels until the party now has well more than 100 representatives in local governments—including a number of mayors and deputy mayors—and has representation in all State and Territory Parliaments, except Queensland and the Northern Territory (although even in the Northern Territory Greens have been elected to local councils in both Darwin and Alice Springs).
Whilst the first senator was elected under a Greens banner back in 1987\(^1\) and the party occasionally held a partial share of the balance of power on a few occasions, the 2010 election saw them gain sole balance of power in the Senate for the first time. The fact that the Greens had time to develop and become more of a known quantity to the public made it much easier to withstand the inevitable scare campaigns about ’extremist’ Greens using the balance of power to destroy the country. Nonetheless, past experience at both State and federal levels made the Greens well aware that these types of scare tactics were inevitable, particularly in the final week or two of the campaign. A key part of the party’s message and actions well before the election period was to demonstrate the Greens’ capacity to be responsible and reasoned in the positions taken, including on Senate votes where their stance was crucial in a balance-of-power context.

The DLP, the Democrats and the Greens occupied different, though partly overlapping, positions on the political spectrum—especially the Democrats and Greens. But direct comparisons of this sort can only go so far, as the parties also operated at different times in history—again with some overlap between the Democrats’ and the Greens’ times in the Senate—and so have to be defined relative to the political environment and the positions of the major parties of the time.

Of course, a major difference is that neither the Democrats nor the DLP (nor One Nation) ever won a House of Representatives seat. Specifically targeting a House of Representatives seat as winnable in a planned, professional way far in advance of a general election was a new experience for the Greens. It also put the party in a political position where it is looking to fill the role not just of a third party with the balance of power in the Senate—vital though that is—but also of directly competing with the two major parties for House of Representatives seats and votes.

In an election campaign in which both major parties were widely seen to have difficulties in attracting new voters, rather than just consolidating their base, the Greens gained the bulk of the swing.

---

\(^1\) Jo Vallentine, first elected to the Senate for the Nuclear Disarmament Party in 1984; after that party suffered internal breakdown, she helped form the Greens WA and was re-elected at the 1987 election under the banner of that party.
The Greens deliberately choose to campaign with positive messages and images, going so far as to modify the traditional design of the well-known traditional Greens’ triangle to reinforce the suggestion of open horizons and a new dawn. The positive, enthusiastic theme was also a key part of the message for the target House of Representatives seat of Melbourne. All year in advance of the election being called, the voters of Melbourne were being informed that they had a real chance to ‘make history’ by electing a Greens member in their seat, with the focus on generating enthusiasm and positive potential rather than a more predominantly negative message.

The seat of Melbourne was the main target for the Greens, as it was clearly the most winnable, and when a convincing case can easily be made that a seat is winnable it in turn makes it easier to build better resourcing and planning. The campaign goal, however, was not just a Senate plus Melbourne one. There was determination to build a sizeable-base vote in a large number of seats, including the inner-urban seat of Brisbane, to provide more possibilities for the next election.

Whilst Melbourne was the standout with 36.17 per cent of the primary vote (just trumping the primary vote of 36 per cent gained by Pauline Hanson when she stood as One Nation candidate for Blair in 1998), the Greens gained more than 20 per cent of the primary vote in eight seats and more than 15 per cent in 36 seats—many of them a long way from the stereotype of a Greens’ inner-city heartland. Despite strong results for Independents in some areas—and an understandable focus on them afterwards given the hung-parliament result—the Greens finished in a top-three position in 137 of 150 seats.
The Greens focused on repeatedly promoting a consistent position on a number of identified key issues well in advance of the election. This included not only the traditional strengths of climate change and the environment, but also human rights, transport, a comprehensive dental-care policy, higher education, industrial relations and more.

As both Labor and the Coalition had undergone significant upheaval and leadership changes in the lead-up to the election, the emphasis on stability and reliability was particularly important for the Greens. There was a deliberate
effort to communicate that the Greens were ‘a safe pair of hands’ not only with balance of power in the Senate, but also as a safe place for people to give their House of Representatives vote.

The Greens also put much greater effort into and had much greater success at fundraising and donations. The party’s clear position to unwind WorkChoices and in particular to abolish the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) helped it receive some financial and other support from a number of key trade unions. As the party itself publicly revealed—in advance of the legally required reporting time line—it also received a very sizeable personal donation of more than $1 million. These resources certainly assisted the Greens in maintaining a significant public advertising presence in the crucial final weeks of the campaign when third parties are normally massively outspent by the two majors. Receiving sizeable donations does present some dilemmas for the Greens, given the party’s history of campaigning for limits on political donations and expenditure, but the majority view is a pragmatic one that until such changes can be made law then it would put the party at too much of a competitive disadvantage to refuse donations, except from sources that are clearly antithetical to the party’s values.

Note

All graphs taken from: <http://greens.org.au/content/greens-results-2010-pictures>